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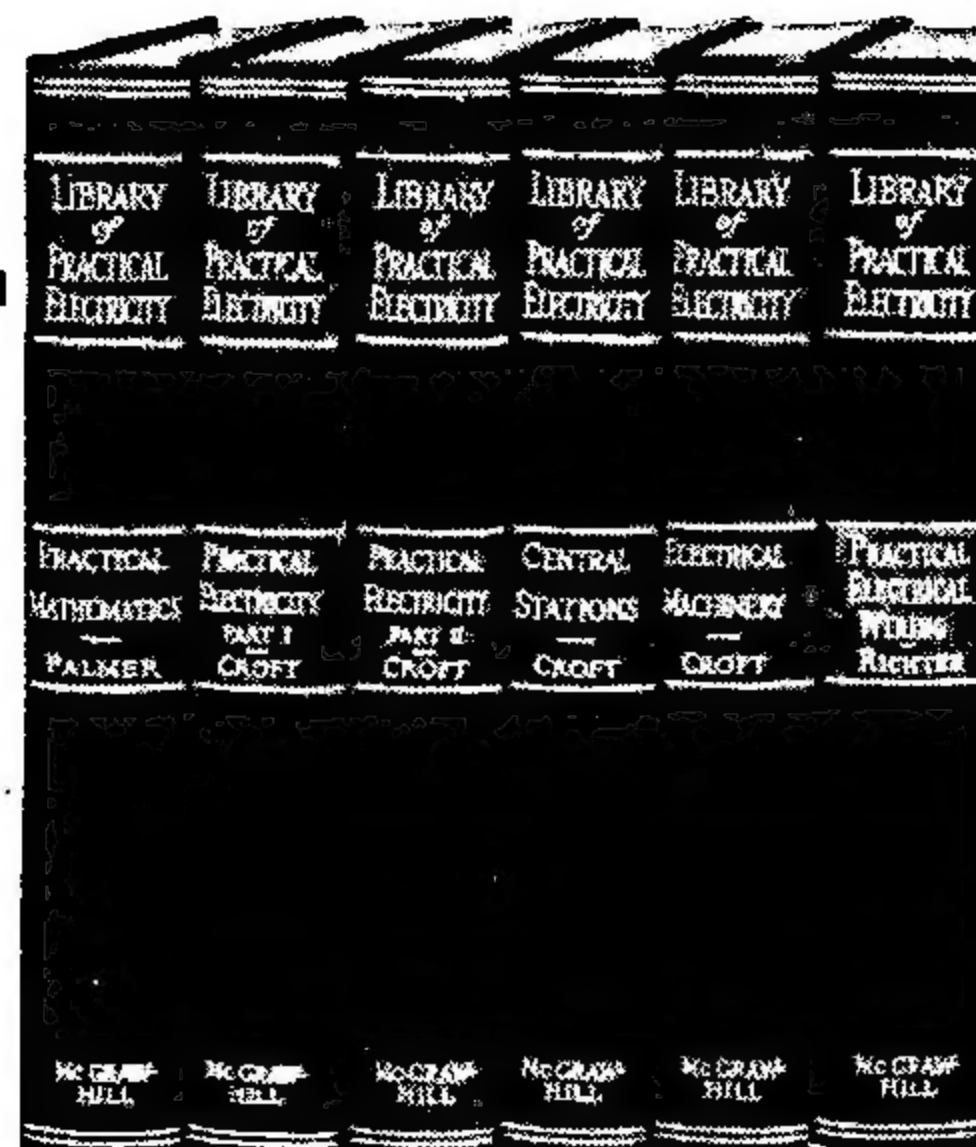
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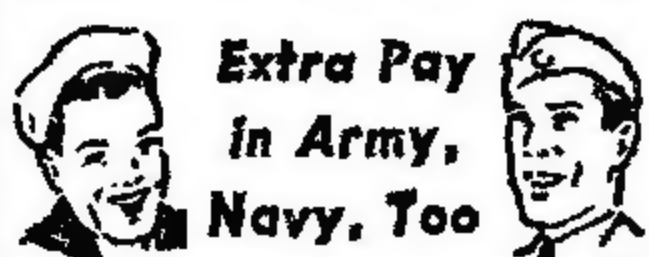
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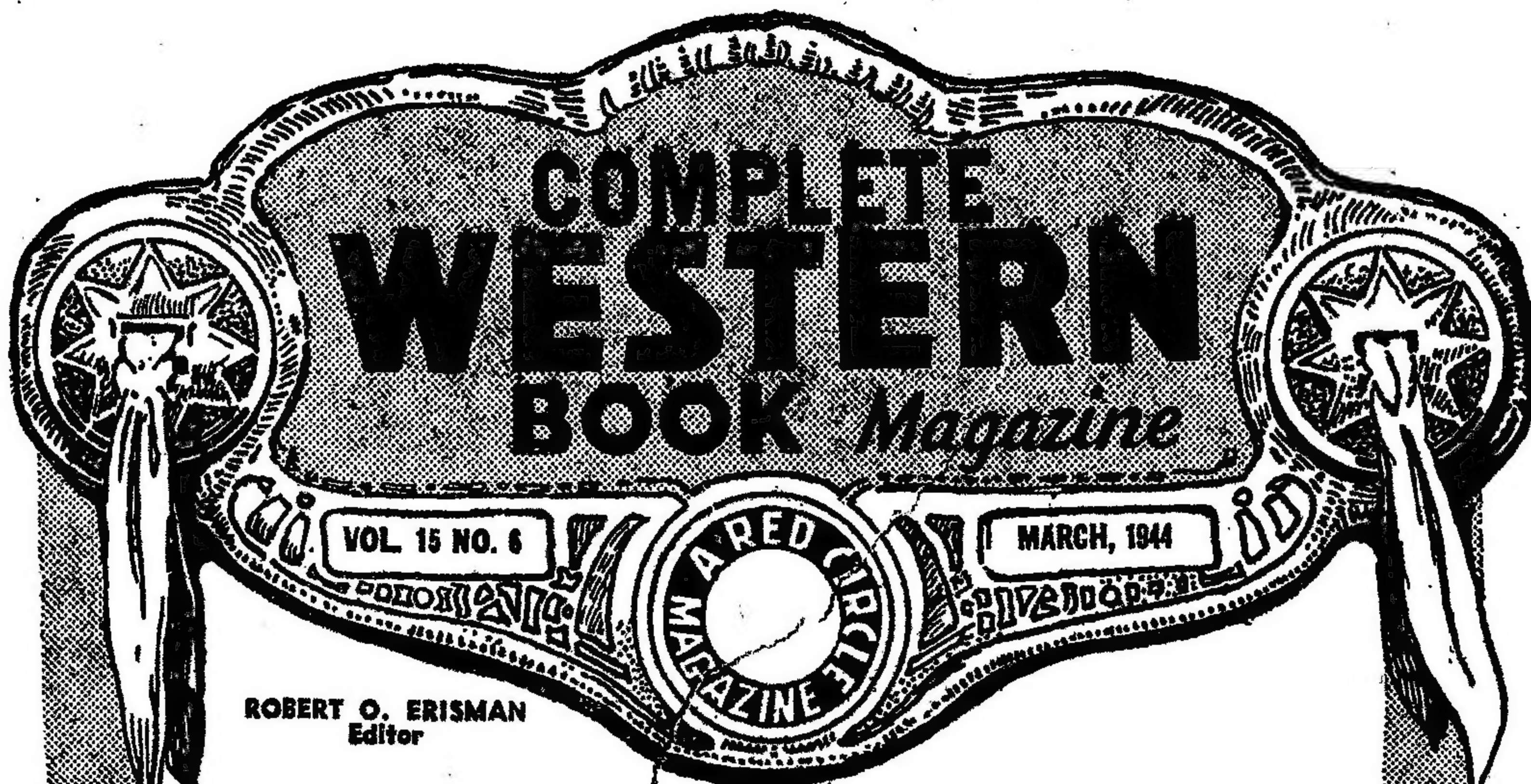
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ROBERT O. ERISMAN
Editor

★ ★ GREAT RANGE-WAR NOVEL ★ ★ Page
THE KID WHO WORSHIPPED GUNSPEED

by Raymond W. Porter 8

There were too many Colt-backed freighters who had a big stake in Saliseen Valley for them to watch new neighbors bring in steel, and if the two-bit muleskinners like Jay Collins didn't have the savvy to throw their hot lead in with the stage barons, they were going to need guts and the gunspeed to buck them!

★ ★ SMASHING HOT-LEAD NOVELETTE ★ ★
Freedom Means Blood and Bullets by George Jensen 60

There were men in the town, sure, who were fast with a gun, but it was the Hilary kid they said had the natural-born Colt-savvy. They'd have put that button up against any notch-hunting lead-slinger. . . .

★ ★ THRILLING SHORT STORIES ★ ★
Boothill Sends a Badman by David Manners 59

When men rode with holsters rigged for fast draws, and the X060 brand was on their leather, only death could wait beyond every boulder, only powdersmoke could pay off!

Call His Hand, Coward—With Cutters! by Ralph Berard 84

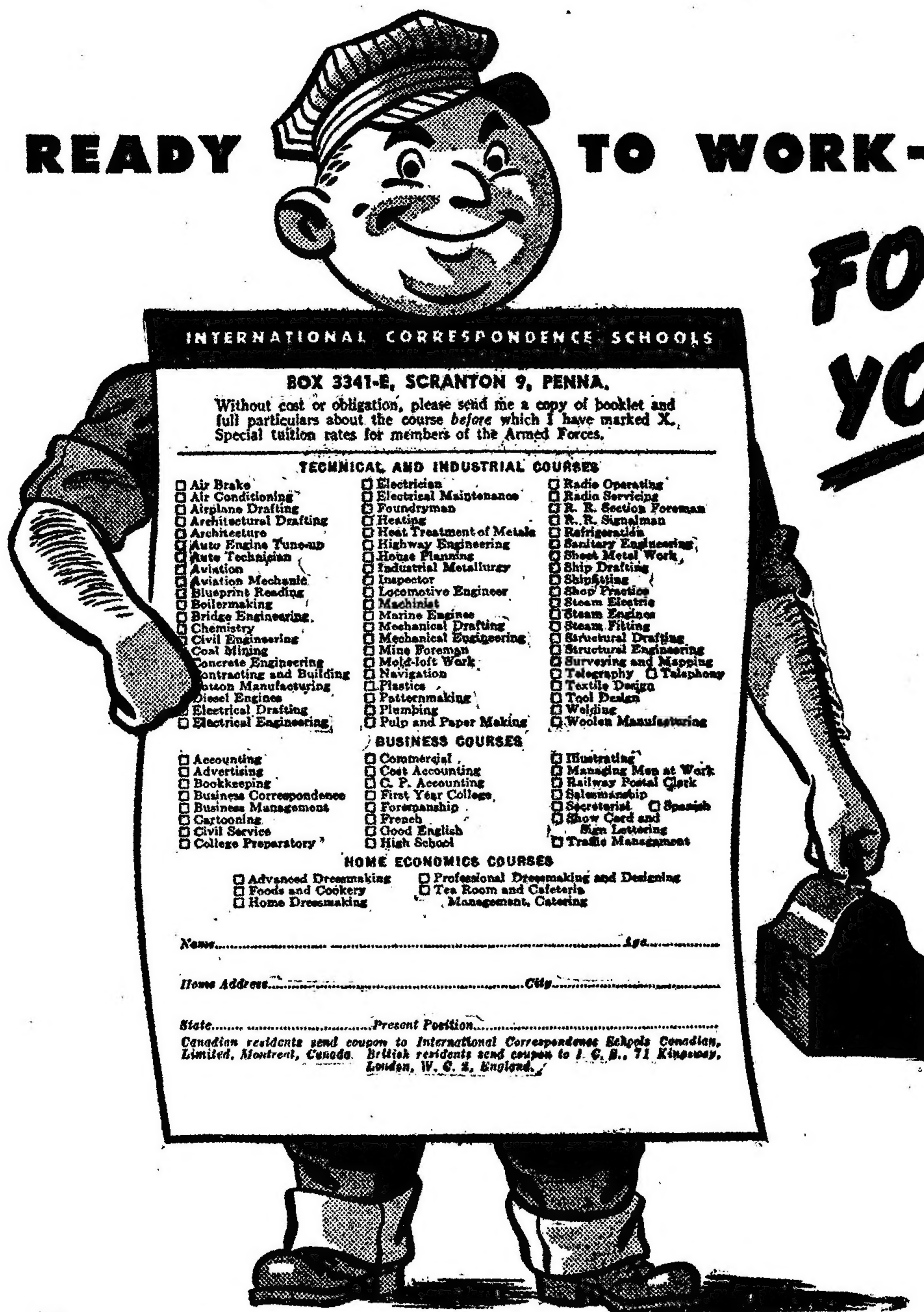
A powdersmoke proposition Lars Kelly was offering the trail wolf—a chance to ride onto eternal range behind smoking guns!

COMPLETE WESTERN BOOK MAGAZINE, published every other month by Newsstand Publications, Inc. Office of publication, 4600 Drexley Avenue, Chicago, Ill. Editorial and executive offices, 350 Fifth Ave., Empire State Bldg., N. Y., N. Y., Martin Goodman, Pres. Entered as second class matter October 16, 1932, at the Post Office at Chicago, Ill., under act of March 3, 1879. Copyright, 1943, by Newsstand Publications, Inc. Title registered at the U. S. Patent Office, Washington, D. C. Yearly subscription, 90 cents. Single copies 15 cents. Not responsible for unsolicited manuscripts. Printed in U. S. A.

MARCH, 1944—ISSUE

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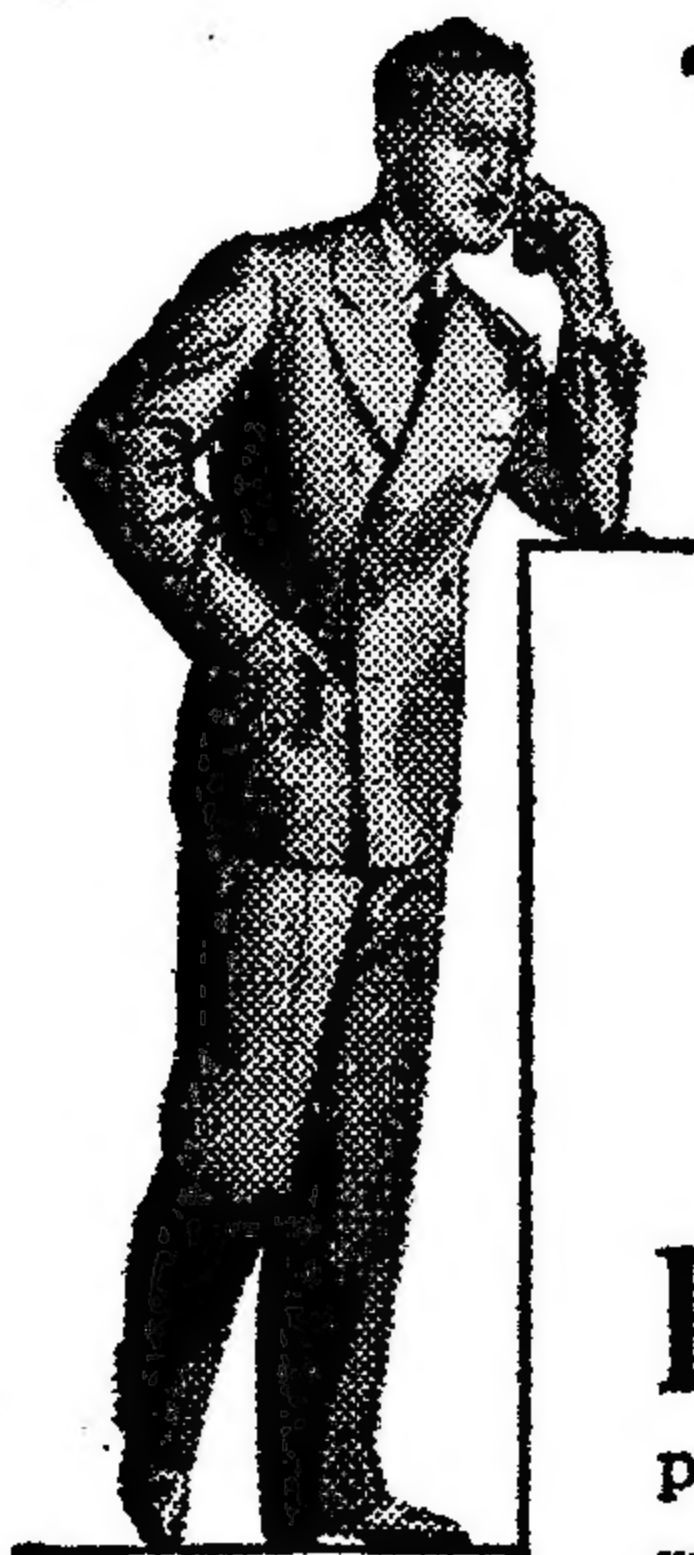
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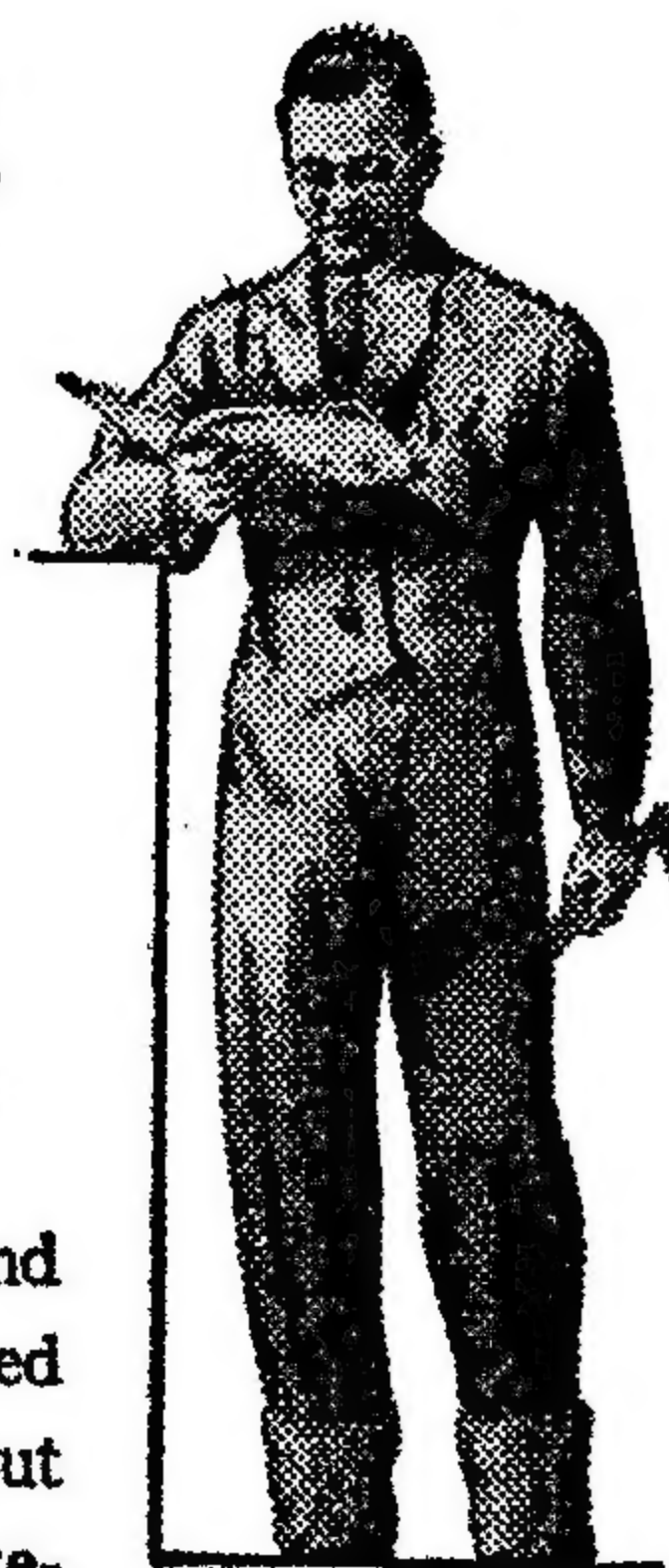
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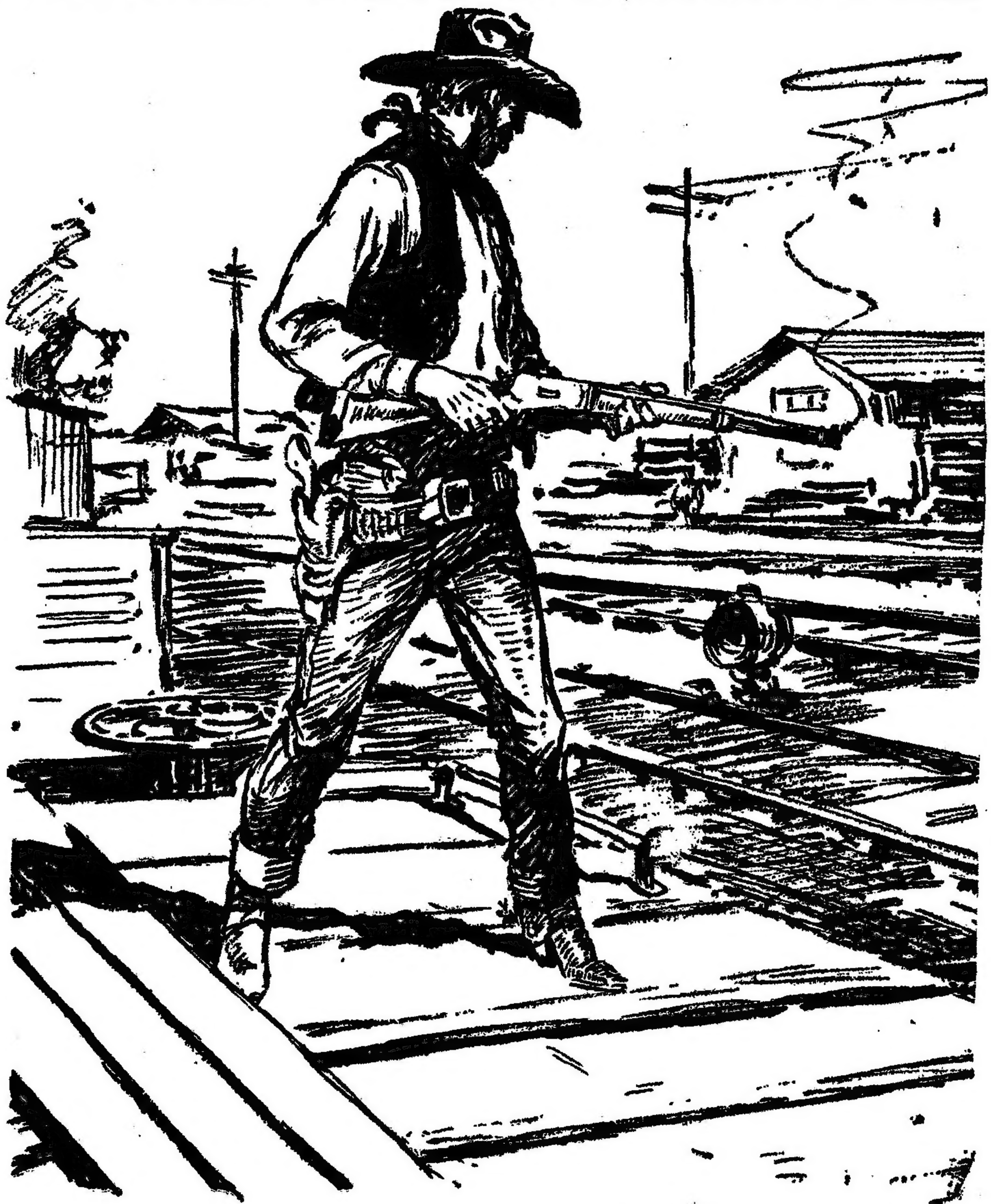
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THE KID WHO WORSHIPPED



STOP—LOOK—LISTEN!

The sign at the railroad crossing brought Jay Collins to a complete stop, and he hunched forward in the wagon seat, listening.

"Well what are you waitin' for?" Art Baxter wanted to know, turning in his saddle to look at the man in the wagon.

"See that sign, don't you?" Jay responded amiably.

In a fight he never used his head. He just used

"To hell with the sign!" growled Baxter. "To hell with the railroad!"

He drew his gun and put five holes through the sign. He glared at it as if he expected it to fall dead.

Slowly, Jay wrapped his lines around the brake, took a shovel from the rack at the side of the wagon, and walked up the graveled roadbed to the sign.

"What's eatin' you?" Baxter asked

THIS WAS THROW IN WITH THE TRAIL BARONS OR BUCK THEM

GUNSPEED

By
RAYMOND W. PORTER



his gun and that big smashing body of his!

The biggest freighters in Saliseen Valley would be bucking new neighbors who tried to bring in steel, and the two-bit mule skinnners like Jay Collins would face a grim choice—either sell out their stakes to the stage barons for powdersmoke gold, or stand and fight and take up residence at last in boothill!

gruffly.

He was a big man, a huge man who moved as if it were an effort. It seemed that one set of muscles went to work to

lift an arm, and another set tightened up to hold the arm where it was; so the simplest movement became a conflict of immense forces. He spoke, too, as if

WITH GUNS AND GUTS!—

SMASH BOOK-LENGTH NOVEL!

he had to force the words out against some great pressure which was trying to keep them in. There was no harmony to the man, although he was built well and looked good—he looked almost too good, with his swirling mustache and his deep brooding eyes and his flowing blonde hair.

Jay Collins tested the solidarity of the post. "Poor old sign," he said. "You killed the poor old sign."

Baxter stared at him in heavy incomprehension. Baxter couldn't understand lightness in any form—physical or verbal. He thought his young friend was touched in the head.

"We can't leave it here," Jay said. "The buzzards or coyotes will get it." And while he spoke with solemnity, there was a chuckle just beneath, and he seemed to enjoy the big man's narrowing look. He knew that Baxter thought him half-cracked, and sometimes he believed it himself. The idea that was going through his head now was one of the things that made him think so. It wouldn't have come to any man who was entirely sane.

BUT Jay Collins pampered these wild ideas, which was no doubt the reason so many of them came to him. Sometimes they were amusing, sometimes dangerous. This one struck Jay as being a little of both.

He spaded the dirt from one side of the sign post, working easily and rhythmically, sinking the spade into the hard earth with a quick firm thrust and tossing the dirt aside and digging in again, all in measured strokes. He worked as though he had a big reserve of strength in his long slim body, as if he could lift the post out of the ground if he wanted to, but was just playing with it.

Now he pushed it to one side, bent down, and shouldered the heavy sign without effort. He walked back and

tossed it into the wagon.

"What are you goin' to do with that thing?" demanded Baxter.

"Take it back and give it a decent buryin'." Jay took up the lines, kicked off the brake, and started on.

After they had crossed the tracks, Baxter rode up by the side of the wagon again. "Instead of tearin' down the sign," he said, "we might of ripped out a couple of rails and done some good."

Jay looked at him and saw that he meant it. "What good would that do?"

"Show 'em we mean business."

"Not that kind of business," Jay said. "Not for me."

Baxter said, "You ain't got the guts to get in this fight! You're tryin' to make a joke out of it. Well, it ain't no joke, and you'll find it out as soon as they get this branch line in."

"Maybe they won't put it in."

"Hell, they've got a gang of men out there right now workin' on it!"

"Sure, I know. But when they find out what you've done, maybe they'll stop."

"Me? What have I done?"

"You shot the darn railroad. You killed it dead."

Baxter could see that he was being laughed at, his flushed face showed that, but he made no retort. His petulant act in shooting the sign was a natural outburst of his feeling against the railroad; but Jay's act in digging it up and his talk about buryin' it was just plain loco. Or was it?

For Jay was saying, "What if we take this sign and plant it, say, just ahead of where they're workin'. Reckon they'd get the idea?"

Baxter got it, slowly. The command, STOP—LOOK—LISTEN! The bullet holes through it. "They ought to," he said. "But it won't do no good, just puttin' up signs, unless we back 'em up."

"Well, it won't do no harm, anyway."

And Jay honestly thought it wouldn't; but that was because he hadn't calculated very far ahead. Jay never did. And for that reason he was facing business disaster without worry.

If the railroad built the branch line into the Salliseen Valley, there would be no need for wagon freighters. Jay was a happy-go-lucky mule skinner who had managed to acquire a string of mules and a wagon of his own, and was engaged in the lucrative business of hauling concentrates and high grade ore from the mines in Salliseen Valley to the smelter at Toprock. The railroad, of course, would ruin his business.

But he wasn't worrying. He had no capacity for worry. Sometimes he would sit down with the firm intention of doing some worrying, but he would get to talking instead, or start playing poker, or think up some practical joke.

LIKE digging up this sign. It was just a joke—although it had its grimmer aspects. There were too many freighters who felt as Art Baxter did about the proposed branch line. They were willing to do anything to stop it. Many of them had a good deal more at stake than Jay, with his one outfit.

Baxter was one of the biggest freighters and had tied up a small fortune in equipment when the mines started, having been encouraged to do so by the mining interests. But as the mines developed, the owners began dickering with the railroad for the branch line.

As long as the deal was in the planning and surveying stage, nobody got much excited; but now that actual work had started, the freighters were fully aware of the calamity which faced them.

Some of them were resigned to the inevitable. They had made big money while it lasted and they had known it couldn't last forever. But it was hard to give up the big money, and to won-

der what you had done with the money you'd made.

Jay was wondering about this when he took the long curve at the head of the valley and saw the railroad gang at work. He drove past them, following the wagon road which had been thrust aside by the railroad right-of-way and now ran parallel to it for several miles.

The afternoon sun was low, and it would soon be time for the grading gang to lay down their tools for the day. They leaned on their picks and shovels and watched the wagon and the man who rode beside it. No greetings were exchanged.

The silence warned Jay that he was trifling with a serious matter and he treated the warning with his usual breezy contempt. Humming a funeral hymn, he stopped the wagon and tossed out the sign. Then he dragged it to a point about a hundred feet ahead of the grading gang.

Baxter swung heavily from his saddle and floundered over the freshly dug ground to stand beside him. Digging rhythmically with the shovel, Jay sang mournfully:

"Nearer, my God, to Thee
Nearer to-o-o Thee-e-e . . ."

The foreman of the railroad gang approached cautiously. "What you doin' there?" he called.

"Diggin' a grave," said Jay, and he went on singing and digging.

From a distance, the foreman stared. Others stopped their teams and some came up, carrying their picks and shovels.

"What do you mean—diggin' a grave?"

"The old sign's dead," said Jay. "The railroad's dead. Bax, he killed it. I'm goin' to bury it here."

He stuck the post in the hole and began shoveling dirt around it. "Got shot five times," he explained. "See? Once through the STOP, once through the

LOOK, and three times through the LISTEN."

The foreman, backed by his men, came on threateningly. "Get the hell off this right-of-way!"

"You better read that sign, Mister!" said Jay.

The foreman read it as though he had never seen one before. And he stopped, he looked, and he appeared to be listening.

"You're crazy as a bat!" he said, then looked at Baxter.

"I ain't crazy," Baxter said. "And I'm tellin' you the same thing. Look at that sign. What happened to it is goin' to happen to any damned railroad man that goes past it." In his laborious forceful way he was hurling the words at them, singly, like rocks.

"You're nuts, too. You're on railroad property. Get off!"

Jay hummed softly, "Nearer to-o-o Thee-e-e-"

THE foreman made a dive at him, first glancing around to see that his gang understood what they were expected to do. They did it, some of them rushing to help him, others starting after Baxter.

Jay swung with his shovel. The foreman ducked, but Jay got him with a glancing blow that sent him sprawling. Instantly two more men came at Jay and he had to drop the shovel for close-in work with his fists. He smashed one of them in the middle, and got a crack on the ear which exploded like a gun.

It was a gun! Baxter's gun. Baxter was shooting into the crowd.

The grading gang was armed only with picks and shovels and horse whips, and most of them had thrown these things aside. In the face of gunfire they stopped. One of them went down, yelling. The rest started to run. They fell over each other, they dived across the ploughed ground, trying to get into fur-

rows.

Baxter emptied his gun and quickly reloaded. Jay got to him as he began shooting again.

"Stop it, you damn fool!" Jay grabbed the gun.

It was turned his way and went off in front of his face. He hit Baxter as hard as he could, right on the point of the chin. The big man quivered, weaved, and went down.

He wasn't out. Jay jumped straddle of him and fought him for the gun. He got it and stood up.

"Now, you blamed idiot—"

Baxter raised up on one elbow. He had another gun. Jay realized that he had lost his own gun in the scuffle, and Baxter had picked it up.

Unless Baxter was out of his head, he wouldn't try to shoot. But you couldn't tell about Baxter. In a fight he never used his head; he just used his gun and that big smashing body of his. Jay had seen him empty his gun in a fight and, when there was no time to reload, wade in with empty gun and with one free fist and with the bulk of his body do much more damage than he had done by shooting.

Disheveled, panting, brooding, he looked up at Jay. And Jay believed he would have to take a choice—shoot him or take a mauling.

Jay could handle a gun with the best of them. But he didn't want to shoot this man. Baxter was his friend, not a close friend, not even a man he admired greatly; but there had never been any trouble between them.

"You hadn't ought to done that." There was a tinge of regret in Baxter's low growl. He knew as well as Jay what this meant if it turned into a fight between them.

"You hadn't ought to have shot that man," said Jay.

The laborer, a swarthy, black-haired fellow, was crying like a baby. He was

wallowing in the freshly spaded dirt near the sign.

STOP—LOOK—LISTEN! It stood garishly out of place, leaning crazily, ignored. It was a mute warning. It told of danger, and its long shadow lay across the writhing man and pointed toward the group of huddled workers.

Possibly its influence was there. For Baxter shook his head and wiped the dirt from his face and pushed back his thick blond hair. "I ought to break you in two," he said, in a way that meant he wouldn't do it.

Jay said, "Let's get out of here."

THEY left the wounded man to his companions, and his moans followed them down the road. Above the rattle of the wagon they could hear him, wailing.

Baxter found it disgusting. "Did you ever hear a man take on like that?" he complained.

"You shot him in the guts," Jay pointed out.

"Sure," Baxter said, with satisfaction.

"You started somethin'."

"I'll finish it. Without your help, it looks like. You thought it was a joke, didn't you? Reckon you see now that it ain't."

"No," Jay agreed. "Now, it ain't a joke."

Cobleskill Mountains fenced off the setting sun and finally corraled the closing day. Night was turned loose on the range, a black gentle night which sought out the grassy lowlands first, then crept up along the foothills and finally got into the higher mountains.

The lights of Salliseen appeared far down the valley and Jay's team stepped along faster, sensing the nearness to home. At the edge of town he turned off the main road toward his barn, and Baxter went on.

Jay watered and fed his mules, then

went to his room at the Applejohn Hotel, where he shaved and cleaned up. It was too late for supper at the hotel, so he ate a short order at the Miner's Dream.

Afterwards, he gravitated naturally to the Fandango, although he knew that Baxter would be there, and he didn't want to see Baxter again so soon. It would have suited him never to see Baxter again. Since this was impossible and since everybody spent what spare time he had at the Fandango, Jay shouldered through the swinging doors and pushed past the crowd at the bar to the tables where the teamsters gathered.

Baxter, always the most noticeable man in a crowd because of his size and his waving blond hair, was at a central table, occupying three chairs. Two would have been enough, but he usually took up three, overflowing with outspread arms and legs to the chairs on each side.

"—they come at me from all sides, and I let 'em have it!"

He looked up and saw Jay, turning everybody's attention to him. Nobody spoke and Jay wondered what Baxter had been saying about him.

"Jaybird says I've started somethin'." His voice took on a jeering note. "And I reckon I have. It's about time *somebody* started somethin'."

"You're damn right it is!" said Soupy Cloughton. "If we let 'em put in that railroad, we're all blowed up."

"That's what I've been tellin' Jaybird, but he thinks we ought to just tuck our tails."

"To hell with Jaybird!" Soupy Cloughton gave Jay a brief contemptuous look. "Him and his one outfit. He ain't got nothin' to lose."

"Just all I've got," Jay said. "That's all."

"Can we help it if you ain't got nothin'?" Soupy asked. "Not even guts enough to stand up for your rights?"

"Guts?" said Jay. He thumped his abdomen speculatively. It was flat and hard. "I don't know. It don't stick out, anyhow."

Soupy Cloughton stuck out a good deal. When there were any eating or drinking contests, Soupy always won them, and when there were no contests, he practised up for the next one. He could drink five gallons of beer on any hot day, and prided himself on the fact—but he was not proud of the belly he got from it.

"Rights?" Jay went on. "Have I got any right to try to stop 'em from buildin' a railroad?"

THIS was treason, and they made the most of it. Any man had a right to stop anything that menaced his well-being, and Jay was a traitor for suggesting that the railroad had a right to promote its own interest.

In the midst of a scathing denunciation, Baxter stopped abruptly. He was looking at two men who had just entered the saloon. One was the sheriff, the other was the foreman of the grading gang.

"That's him!" said the foreman, pointing to Baxter.

Sheriff Cain was a tough old-timer who had earned the support of all the county, if not its undivided affection. On his gaunt frame hung the flashing trophies of his office—the immense gold badge having been presented to him by a committee of citizens at the start of his fifth successive term of office, and the big gold-handled sixshooters having been a gift of Dudley Crown, a rancher who wished to show his appreciation for the sheriff's work in rounding up a gang of rustlers.

All the honors he had won blazed upon Sheriff Cain just like the badge and the sixguns. His eyes gleamed with it, his walk heralded it. All he had to do in these later years was to walk up

to an offender and look him in the eye. If that didn't work, he might have to speak to him, quietly.

He walked up to Art Baxter and looked at him. Nothing happened. He spoke to him, quietly. "What's all this about?"

Even then Baxter didn't quail. "You tell me," he said loftily.

"This man says you shot one of his hands."

Baxter turned his head ponderously and looked the foreman up and down. "Who? Me?"

The foreman was short and blocky and ill at ease. He was just a chunk of common clay, baked and hardened and cracked by the sun—and by a gang of railroad workers. He seemed to realize his inferiority, and so he tried to get tough.

"You ain't denyin' it, are you?"

Baxter stared at him. "You're accusin' *me* of shootin' somebody?"

"You can't lie out of it!"

Baxter began to gather himself from the three chairs. "You're tellin' me I'm a liar?"

"I'm tellin' you!" The foreman turned to the sheriff, "And I'm tellin' you, sheriff, he's the man—"

Baxter struggled to his feet.

"I wouldn't do that, Bax," said the sheriff.

Baxter seized the squat, heavy, fighting foreman, whirled him above his head a few times and slammed him to the floor. Then sat down. The foreman tried limply to get up. He managed to get to his feet, then whirled around as if somebody had pushed him, and sprawled out on the floor again.

"I told you not to do that," said the sheriff, with the dignity invested in him by the state and the admiring citizens of the state.

"I didn't hear you," Baxter said.

Unperturbed, the sheriff went on, "You might have broke his neck."

"He ain't got no neck."

THE foreman's head had been jammed down into his shoulders so that no neck showed.

"Maybe you broke his head."

"Uh, huh. Maybe I'll have to break a lot of heads to stop this railroad. They got hard heads to break, though. Look at him."

The foreman was getting up again, and this time he managed to stand a little before he fell.

"You better take him out of here," Baxter told the sheriff.

"Why should I take him out?"

"You brought him in."

"No, I didn't. He walked in. He brought me in."

"Well, take him out, anyway. I don't want to have to hurt him."

The sheriff called, "Will!" and a small, neat man in white standing collar came diffidently through the crowd.

Will Depew was proprietor of the Fandango, although he appeared to have more talent for selling neckties than for running the biggest and rowdiest joint in town. It was as much of a surprise to Will Depew as to everyone else to find that he had made a success of the saloon business, and he wore a constantly bewildered look in his mild gray eyes.

"Put this man in a room somewhere, Will," said the sheriff. "And you better get Doc to look him over."

Will Depew motioned one delicate hand and a burly man with closely shorn skull took charge of carrying out the injured foreman.

The ruckus had attracted everybody in the place. Several girls stood on the platform around the piano, along with a couple of fiddlers and a piano player. Only one girl was in the crowd which jammed around Baxter and the sheriff. This was Jo-Jo, and she was there beside Will Depew, looking after him, ad-

vising him, taking away that attention he otherwise would have had.

Jo-Jo was the main reason why Depew had made a success of the Fandango. It was Jo-Jo's idea that call it the Fandango—although there were plenty of customers who could think that was such a good idea. The name was too fancy.

But then Jo-Jo was pretty fancy herself. And none of the customers objected to her. She was a large woman and the customers of the Fandango liked them big. When they put their arms around a woman to dance, they liked to get an armful. They liked especially to get an armful of Jo-Jo.

Trying to figure out why a girl like that married a man like Will Depew was enough to drive the customers nuts. It wasn't for his money. Jo-Jo could have all the money she wanted. Day and night it was thrust at her. No, she didn't marry Will Depew for his money. Nor for his good looks. Will Depew looked like a cotton-tail rabbit wearing a collar and tie.

"I'll have to arrest you," Sheriff Cain told Baxter.

"Arrest me?" Baxter spraddled out lazily. "Why?"

"You can't go around shootin' railroad hands."

"I didn't shoot anybody."

Sheriff Cain sighed. "Can you prove that?"

"Can you prove that I did? That's the point."

"He said you did, and he's got witnesses."

"And I say I didn't, and I've got witnesses that say I was here all day."

HE looked around at the crowd and his eyes met Jay's in challenge. There was a short silence. Jay understood what he was expected to do, but didn't think he could.

"Sure you was, Bax. I'll swear to that." Jo-Jo said it, warmly and impulsively. There was an immediate chorus of assent from the teamsters. "Yeah, Bax, you was here . . . Sure, Bax . . . I'll swear to that."

"See?" Baxter leered at the sheriff. "I got witnesses. I can get more than he's got, I'll bet you."

"He said somebody else was with you." The sheriff looked inquiringly at the many faces.

Jay found it an uncomfortable scrutiny. He wasn't quite sure what he should do. If he was asked the question directly, "Were you there?" he wouldn't lie about it, because he didn't lie about anything. He had found that lying took a peculiar ability that he didn't have, and it also took his peace of mind. If a man started lying, he had to be consistent; he had to keep on lying. Consistency was not one of Jay's strongest points.

He was notoriously apt to change his mind, and while he regarded this as an annoying weakness, he hadn't been able to overcome it. Theoretically, he had been arguing on the side of the railroad. Actually, he was as much against the railroad as any man in the crowd.

"Did he say who was with him?" Baxter asked.

"Of course he didn't know who it was. He didn't point nobody out but you."

"And he made a bad mistake when he pointed me out," Baxter said. "Didn't he, boys?"

"He sure did, Bax! . . . You're mighty right, he did! . . ."

The sheriff said gently, "Will, was Baxter here all day?"

Will Depew stammered, "Why, I—I—" He glanced at Jo-Jo, and she smiled and gave him a slight nod—"Why, I think so. Yes,——" Jo-Jo's smile was more firm, her nod more pronounced—"Yes, I'm sure he was."

"You'll swear to that, Will?"

"Why—yes, of course."

The sheriff nodded approvingly. Jo-Jo smiled approvingly. Will Depew looked pleased.

"And you, Tracy?" the sheriff asked a red-faced freighter. "And you, Charlie? . . . And you, Chaco? . . . Dick? . . . Ingles? . . ."

Then he came to Jay.

"And you, Jay?"

Jay said nothing. He wasn't going to lie about it. He wasn't going to say anything at all. But wouldn't that be the same as lying? If he just kept quiet, he would be taking sides with Baxter, and in this Baxter was wrong.

The sheriff broke the awkward silence. "How about you, Salveter? . . . Fine! And you, Rideout? . . . That's enough."

A growing disgust filled Jay right up to the neck. "That's a hell of a way to go!" And there went his perfectly good intention of keeping quiet.

Sheriff Cain spoke very mildly. "What do you mean, Jay?"

"You're the sheriff! This man come to you expecting a square deal. And what does he get? He gets rough-housed out of here, and you start buildin' a case up against him."

THERE was a bullet-hole in the sheriff's jaw which had healed many years ago leaving a white claw-like scar where the flesh had been sewn together. These "claws" seem to stretch out now toward the corner of his mouth.

"I'm the sheriff of this county," he stated, rattling his shining armor. "I'm makin' an investigation of this case. If you don't like it—I'll investigate you."

Jay knew how the sheriff investigated people who tried to interfere with the enforcement of his kind of law. He usually started in by cracking their heads with one of his gold-handled

guns. Then he took them to jail until they were thoroughly "investigated."

Nevertheless, he said, "No, I don't like it. I was with Baxter and I saw him—"

He was watching that claw-like scar. As soon as it grabbed the corner of the sheriff's mouth and twisted it downward, the sheriff would grab his gun. Jay had seen it happen before, and he knew that the sheriff could buffalo a man before you could say buffalo.

So he was ready for it. But he wasn't ready for the thing that happened behind him. At first he thought that side of the house had fallen down, then he saw Baxter's paw coming at him again, while he spun under its first impact.

He hit the floor with a crash that seemed to splinter every bone in his body. As he lay stunned he felt himself being hoisted in the air and whirled around, and he knew he was being treated to the same medicine given the railroad foreman—in probably a stronger dose. He got hold of Baxter's long, blonde hair and when Baxter slammed him down, he held on.

There was a bear-like roar from Baxter, as he crashed down on top of Jay. This made it all the worse. The swinging lamps at the ceiling became lurid streaks of light that flashed in front of Jay's eyes, then plunged into darkness.

Something cold splashed him in the face, and he thought they were throwing water on him. But it was wind in his face. He was riding—no flying through the night air. He had wings! He could see them back there—but too far back to be attached to him. Actually they were the swinging doors of the Fandango.

He had come through those swinging doors and now he was nosed down toward the sidewalk. He turned his nose just as he hit it, and slid on the side of his face down a rough plank.

This brought forth a squeaking noise like the iron rim of a wagon wheel sliding on rock when the brake is suddenly applied. Jay lay on the sidewalk and wondered what his head was made of, to make a noise like that.

It took him some time to discover the noise had come not from the friction between his head and the sidewalk, but from the throat of a girl who was there on the sidewalk. He had slid into her, and she had made the squeak.

"Papa!" she said.

In his confusion, Jay thought she was talking to him and he knew that he wasn't her papa. He reached for a post that supported the wooden awning and his groping hand touched the girl's ankle. Again she said, "Papa!"

Jay remembered a doll he had once bought for a little girl in a mining camp. It said "Mama" when you touched it in the right place.

This one said "Papa." What he could see of her, she looked something like that other doll. She was fluffy and full-cheeked.

Jay got hold of the post and drew himself up for a good look at her. It was hard to see much with only the light which streamed above the swinging doors. He felt compelled to say something, so he mumbled, "Excuse me, ma'am. I—hope I didn't hurt you."

SHE didn't answer. She probably thought he was a bum, and that being thrown out of a saloon was a common occurrence with him.

"Come on, Becky," said a stern voice, and Jay saw that the man beside her was Dudley Crown. He knew who Dudley Crown was, but doubted if Crown knew him. And, apparently, Crown had no desire to make his acquaintance.

It was not exactly the time for introductions, and Jay could see this was not the way to make friends or influence

people. But he didn't want them to get the wrong idea about him. Strangely enough, that seemed more important at the moment than the urgent matter of going back after Baxter.

"We was just havin' a little argument," he said apologetically, "—about the railroad."

Crown paused with his hand on the girl's arm. "It looks like you lost the argument," he said gravely.

"Oh, it's just gettin' started," Jay assured him.

Crown started on, then turned back. "You're a freighter, aren't you?"

Jay got a mite of pleasure out of the fact that the great man recognized him, but it was far from enough to counterbalance his embarrassment.

"I hear you freighters are going to keep them from building the railroad," Crown said in a grimly amused voice.

Baxter appeared in the crowd that had collected in the door of the saloon.

"I saw a couple of cowboys rope a train once. They thought they could bulldog the thing. You're going to find yourself in the same fix," Crown said, and led the girl away.

Jay walked toward the swinging doors, and everybody but Baxter got out of the way.

"Ain't you had enough," Baxter asked.

Jay stepped up facing him. There were only the swinging doors between them, which concealed each arm movements from the other.

"You're a mighty big man, ain't you?" Jay said. "You're as big as a bull. I ought to make you fight me with a gun. I could shoot your ears off, and you know it."

"Could you? Let's see you try it."

Jay couldn't see what Baxter was doing with his hands, there behind the door, but he could see the right shoulder move and he had a good idea of what was going on. Undoubtedly, Bax-

ter had his gun out. He could shoot through the door and nobody could say that he had taken an unfair advantage, for no witness could say who had drawn first.

He had apparently expected Jay to force a gun-fight and now he was watching for a movement of Jay's shoulder which would be his signal to blaze away.

So Jay did what he wasn't expected to do. He twisted to one side and at the same time plunged into the door, knocking Baxter backward.

Baxter's gun roared, but Jay was out of its way, smashing in from the side. He caught the big man with a clout on the jaw, reeling him backward, and not giving him a chance to get his balance. Two more smashes in the face had him going down.

But Baxter still had the gun and he shot again. Jay kicked at the weapon, missed it, but hooked onto the other man's chin. This was purely accidental, but its effect was just as good.

The back of Baxter's head hit the floor and Jay had the satisfaction of dishing out what he had been taking. He didn't wait for Baxter to get up, because Baxter seemed to be in no condition to get up; so he kicked at the gun again, and—accidentally—kicked him on the ear. This was too bad, of course, but accidents are bound to happen.

YOU can ask the men who saw that fight and some of them will tell you that Jay knocked Baxter down and stomped him in the face. They will tell you it was the dirtiest fight, and the bloodiest one they ever saw. One thing they give Jay credit for—he was much the smaller and he didn't draw his gun, although Baxter took three shots at him.

The third shot hit somebody in the crowd.

"Will! Oh—Will!"

Jo-Jo's screams stopped the fight. They told of the real tragedy of that fight—that Will Depew, the little proprietor of the Fandango, was shot.

Baxter heaved himself from the floor, wiped the blood from his face, and staggered toward the hysterical woman and the crumpled little man she held in her arms. Like everyone else, Jay joined the crowd and looked on helplessly. Nobody could do anything, because Will Depew was dead. The bullet had struck him squarey in the forehead.

Jo-Jo was the last one to be convinced of this fact and they had to take her away from him. She watched them carry him away, and then she looked up and saw Baxter.

Jay saw the change that came over her, and it put a chill through him. She seemed to grow years older. She became hard and sexless and almost lifeless—like something frozen to death.

Sheriff Cain, standing near her, mumbled, "It was an accident, Jo-Jo."

Jo-Jo's frozen stare never wavered.

Baxter looked as if he were freezing up, too. His face was getting white—where it wasn't bruised and smeared with blood. "You know I didn't mean to do it, Jo-Jo," he said.

It was almost magic the way Jo-Jo got that big-gold-handled gun out of the sheriff's holster. Jay was watching her all the time and all he saw was a blur of movement. He didn't know what she was doing till after she had done it.

Firing the gun, however, took something besides nimble, light-fast fingers. It took a big strong hand to hold the gun and pull the hammer back. While Jo-Jo struggled with it, the sheriff grabbed her.

She put up a better fight than many a tough customer Sheriff Cain had been called on to handle. She was much harder to subdue because he couldn't handle her the way he would a man. And a man

wouldn't have kicked him on the shins and clawed his eyes. He finally hollered for help. But nobody wanted to help him.

When at last he wrestled the gun away from her, she snatched the other one. This time she took both hands to it, and this time she shot it. But it went over Baxter's head.

Sheriff Cain brought his arm down upon her extended hand with a blow that knocked the weapon from her fingers. She grabbed her arm, yelled in pain, and jumped upon his foot. He slapped her, hard. She stumbled away from him and fell. She lay on the floor, sobbing, and the sheriff was whipped.

One of the girls went to Jo-Jo, and knelt down beside her and comforted her, and then more of the girls came and some of them cried and some of them glared at the sheriff.

He swung on Baxter. "Get the hell out of here!" he yelled.

And Baxter seemed glad to get out.

THINGS quieted down after that. Jo-Jo went away with the girls and the customers broke up in groups to talk it over. Fights and even killings were common enough in the Fandango, and when one man killed another on purpose, it was taken the same as droughts and blizzards and other natural catastrophes. But an accidental killing was a tragedy.

Especially with a harmless little codger like Will Depew the victim. Everybody liked him, and everybody liked Jo-Jo. Everybody wondered what would happen to the Fandango now.

"Jo-Jo will run it, herself," predicted Soupy Cloughton.

"A woman run a place like this?"

"She's been runnin' it, all along."

"She worked here before she married him. She knows the business."

Jay listened to the talk but took no part in it. He was depressed with the

idea that it was partly his fault, and he couldn't forget the way Jo-Jo had looked at Baxter. Jay had no use for Baxter, and a little while ago was trying to beat his brains out. That would have been all right. One man could kill another man, but it wasn't right for a woman to kill a man. It wasn't right for a woman to have the thing happen to her that had happened to Jo-Jo.

Worrying about Jo-Jo's troubles, Jay had almost forgotten his own—until he saw the railroad foreman coming across the floor. The man had one arm in a sling, and he walked with a limp. He was searching through the crowd and when he saw Jay he stopped, stared a moment, then walked up to him.

"You're the other one!" he said.

Jay pretended that he didn't understand. He wanted a little time to think this over. If he admitted that he saw Baxter kill the railroad hand, he would be taking sides with the railroad against his own kind. If he denied it, he would be taking sides with Baxter; he would be taking the wrong side. And he would be lying.

"Hey! Sheriff!" The foreman waved his one good arm at Sheriff Cain, who stood at the bar.

"Come here!"

The sheriff came with the slow dignity of one who must serve the public, but wishes it strictly understood that he cannot be ordered around.

"Here's the other guy, Sheriff! He's the one that pulled up the sign and put it up on the right-of-way!"

The sheriff looked questioningly at Jay, then said to the foreman, "You're sure about that?"

"Hell, yes! Just as sure as I am that the big guy killed Domingo!"

"Then you can't be very sure. Art Baxter—the other man you accused—was here all day. He's got a bunch of witnesses to prove it."

"He's a liar! They're all liars . . .!"

"Be careful, now. That kind of talk is dangerous around here. You ought to know it by now."

"You can't scare me! You ain't tryin' to help me. You're tryin' to protect these hoodlums!"

The scar on Sheriff Cain's jaw stretched its claws.

"I'll get a railroad bull in here!" said the foreman. "I've got the railroad behind me!"

THE sheriff said slowly, "I reckon you're a little bit out of your head. You come along with me, and I'll take care of you tonight—"

"No you don't! I've been 'taken care of' already, by your crowd. I'm goin' to the division superintendent."

"Wait a minute! You've made some serious charges, and I'm investigatin' them. I've got to have you here to help me."

"I've helped you enough! I've pointed out both men to you and you haven't done a damn thing. Where's the big guy now?"

"He's around. You come on with me, now—" The sheriff took him by the arm.

"Like hell I will! . . . Hey! . . . You can't do this to me! . . ."

Jay spoke up. "Just a minute, Sheriff! I'm the one you ought to be takin' in, looks to me like."

He was ignored by the sheriff, who was having his hands full right then, and possibly didn't hear. Jay pushed up beside him.

"You got the wrong man, sheriff," he said, so that the sheriff and everybody else around could hear.

The sheriff turned on him angrily. "Get out of the way! You're drunk."

"Oh, no I ain't. I look this way because I've been in a fight. I've been in a couple of fights today. The first one took place out there along the road, where this gent said it did."

The sheriff shoved him aside. "You can tell me about that later."

Jay followed him as he dragged his howling prisoner toward the door.

"I pulled up that sign just like he said, Sheriff, and put it where they were workin'. Baxter was with me. They jumped us, and—"

Jay got a glimpse of Soupy Cloughton coming up behind him. Jay was expecting it this time. "And Baxter shot the Mexican!" he finished, whirling as he said it, dodging Cloughton's blow, and landing one squarely to the side of his head. He got in one more good one, and Cloughton was out of it.

There were other men in that crowd who worked for Cloughton, and for Baxter. There were also a lot of small, independent freighters, all of whom were bitterly opposed to the railroad. And Jay was taking the side of the railroad.

They surged around him. They were friends of his—or had been his friends. They wanted to know why Jay was turning against them. They didn't understand—and they were not capable of understanding; they were too excited.

"You're all mad as hell at me, now," Jay said. "Maybe you'll see it my way when you cool off, maybe you won't. Anyway, it's like this. Baxter killed the Mexican. Some old codger workin' out there on the railroad. Sure, you don't want the railroad in here. I don't want it. But that old Mexican didn't have nothin' to do with puttin' the railroad in here!"

Somebody called, "He was helpin' to build it, wasn't he?"

"Yes, but don't you see? He was just workin' at his job—just doin' what they told him to. And along comes me and Baxter and starts the fight—"

"Bax said *they* started the fight!"

"Well, they did, I reckon. They tried to throw us off, when we went in there

and put up that sign. I was doin' it for a kind of joke, but I knew damn well it would start a fight. I was ready for a fight—I'm always ready for a fight. Right now, I'm ready for one, boys. Don't push me."

They stood all around him, and looked at him. They didn't push him.

He walked quietly out of the Fandango, knowing he had started the biggest fight of his life. . . .

NEXT morning he awoke with many pains and bruises, and he looked at himself glumly in the mirror. One black eye, a skinned ear, a lump on his jaw, a bruised lip. These were the things that showed. All over his body were other, more painful bruises. Jay had no more vanity than the next man, but he hated to look like the loser. He was in for a lot of joshing. Or was he? Remembering the faces of his friends in the Fandango, he was sure they wouldn't be joshing him about this fight.

He wondered how Art Baxter looked and felt this morning. Baxter lived at the hotel, also, and his room was just two doors down the hall. Jay would be seeing him, and no doubt soon.

He eased himself back on the bed and tried to figure what he ought to do. He had taken his stand against Baxter. He would testify against him, if there was a trial. Since the railroad was mixed up in it, there might be.

But he couldn't personally see to it that Baxter was brought to trial for killing the railroad hand, nor did he have any desire to do so. That was up to the law. The Law, of course, was represented first of all by Sheriff Cain. And Sheriff Can was bound to protect Baxter.

The sheriff's stand was easy enough to comprehend. He and Baxter were partners in the freighting business. The sheriff stood to lose as much as any-

body, if the railroad came in.

Then there was the killing of Will Depew, on top of everything else. Baxter ought to be punished for that, even though it was accidental, because he shot into the crowd. But he wouldn't be. And Jay couldn't do anything about that either. No Law on earth could undo that harm.

It was all pretty much of a muddle, and so was Jay's head. He needed some coffee.

He got on his clothes and went down to the dining room. It was late and there were only two people in the dining room, a man and a girl. Jay realized with a pang of embarrassment that they were Dudley Crown and the girl he had called Becky. They sat at the main table at which everybody ate.

Jay had the choice of sitting down with them, or trying to back out unnoticed. Just then the girl glanced up and saw him. She didn't look so doll-like this morning. She had a white scrubbed look, with her hair pulled up off her ears. Her cheeks were not pink at all—when he first looked at her.

As he continued to stare, however, they took on some color. And her eyes got that glassy, scared gleam which he had seen in them last night. Strictly as a female specimen, she didn't rate so high with Jay. She was too lean and lanky. She didn't look like she'd had enough to eat.

But she was something special, just the same. She was something fresh and new, and something important too, if she belonged to Dudley Crown. And she still thought Jay was a bum, who got himself thrown out of saloons. He would have to straighten her out on that.

With an air of being at ease, he pulled out a chair near her and sat down.

Dudley Crown looked up, and frowned as though he were trying to remember something. He remembered

it. "Oh! You're the man that—we met last night," he said, with a thin smile.

"I was the man that got throwed out of the Fandango," said Jay. "Was you ever throwed out of a saloon, Mr. Crown?"

CROWN laughed. "Well, now, let me see. Not lately. anyway."

"It's a funny feelin'. You look back and see them swingin' doors and you'd swear that you had wings and was flyin'." He glanced at the girl to see how the girl was taking this, but she wasn't. She was just staring at him.

"You were flying when we first saw you," Crown chuckled. "What was the trouble?"

"Nothin' much, not right then. A friend of mine didn't like somethin' I said. The real trouble come later."

"After you went back into the saloon?"

"Will Depew got killed. Accidental."

"Depew? Oh, he owned the place, didn't he?"

"That's right. He was a nice little gent. Too bad about him."

"Yes, that's too bad," Crown agreed perfunctorily. Then, "What was it you said that your 'friend' didn't like?"

"Nothin' much. I just said that the railroad had a right to build a track in here if they wanted to."

Crown looked surprised. "You said that? Aren't you a freighter?"

"That's right. Collins is my name. Jay Collins." He was ready to extend his hand. But Crown didn't notice.

"But I thought all the freighters were against the railroad coming in here."

"They are. It'll ruin 'em."

"Then why is it that you are in favor of the railroad?"

"I didn't say I was in favor of it. I just said they had a right to build a line in here if they wanted to."

"Oh!" Crown looked at him with some respect. "I see."

Jay cut another glance at the girl. She still didn't see. He was getting impatient with her. He felt like reaching over and pinching her to see if she would say "Papa!" She ought to say something.

Mrs. Applejohn came with a platter of ham and eggs, and Jay told her all he wanted was lots of coffee.

"My, My!" said the hotel lady. "You look purt-near as bad as Baxter this mornin'!"

"Purt-near, you say? That's better than I was expectin'."

"Ain't you never goin' to have sense enough to quit your fightin'?" She answered her own question. "I don't reckon you will. But it looks like you'd learn not to jump on anybody twice as big as you are."

"He jumped onto me."

"Well, you give a purty good account of yourself, I understand. It's too bad about Will, ain't it?" She went away, shaking her head.

There was silence for a while.

"Papa!"

There it was again. Jay looked up, startled. He waited anxiously to see if she would say anything else.

"Will you please pass the eggs?" She said it! Just as plain as you please.

The plate of ham and eggs was sitting near Jay and he grabbed it with alacrity, and handed it to her. "There you are, ma'am!"

"Thank you," she said.

She took the plate daintily, and transferred two eggs and a big hunk of ham to her plate. Jay could see the traces of egg on her plate, and he wondered how many more she had stowed away.

AND he thought she looked like she didn't get enough to eat! Well, maybe she never had, until now. Maybe Dudley Crown was starving the poor girl.

"This is a good place to eat, ain't it?" he said, admiringly watching her take another biscuit, break it in two, and apply a slab of butter.

"It certainly is," she agreed.

Jay's spirits were soaring. She could talk, just like anybody else. Except nicer and sweeter. And that glass-eyed stare was gone. She was a right cute looking thing, all in all. Skinny. But, she'd fill out, if she stayed here long.

"How long you goin' to be here?" he asked.

She glanced across the table at her father. "How long are we going to be here, Papa?"

"I don't know exactly. I'm here to meet a cattle buyer. He said he'd be here today, but I can't count on him. May have to wait two or three days. Don't know why I put up with him."

"Two or three days!" Jay exclaimed, cheerfully. "You're daughter ought to like that."

"Why? Crown asked.

"Well — she — she seems to like it here. She likes the ham and eggs. And the biscuits."

"Anybody likes ham and eggs and hot biscuits," said Crown. "Especially my daughter. She likes anything to eat."

"Why, Papa!"

"I don't know why she don't get fat," Crown said.

"I don't want to get fat!" said the girl.

Jay was intensely interested, and also curious. "Why not?" he asked.

She gave him a cold look. "Why should I want to be fat? I'm no cow, getting ready for the market."

"You're no cow," Crown said, "but you're gettin' ready for the market."

Jay laughed. Not at what Crown had said, particularly, but just because he felt like laughing. The world had changed completely. The world was a good place, after all. Full of squabbles

and fights and ham and eggs—and people.

But it was the wrong time to laugh. The girl didn't speak to him after that.

He talked to Crown, mostly about the railroad. Crown acknowledged that the railroad would be a big benefit to him, not only in transporting ore from his mines, but it would save him a long drive with his cattle. The nearest rail point now was White Springs, over a hundred miles away. He lived in White Springs, although Salliseen was only about fifteen miles from his ranch.

Before they were through eating, Mark Pomeroy came in. Jay didn't know Pomeroy very well. He knew that Pomeroy had a ranch somewhere, though he didn't work at it much, for he spent a lot of time in town hanging around the Fandango, particularly around Jo-Jo.

Plenty of customers spent a lot of their time hanging around Jo-Jo, and Jay didn't resent it. For all their admiration of her, they treated her with all the respect due the wife of Will Depew. Jo-Jo danced with them, just like one of the girls. She would serve them drinks. She would play the piano and sing. She was the main attraction at the Fandango. Just the same, she was Mrs. Will Depew, and she let everybody know it.

It seemed to Jay that Mark Pomeroy did not recognize this fact. His admiration for Jo-Jo did not seem to stop within the respectful boundaries set up for the rest of the crowd. Will Depew didn't exist, so far as Mark Pomeroy was concerned. Jay had been waiting and hoping for some sign from Jo-Jo that she didn't like this. But Jo-Jo never gave the sign.

THIS was probably the basis for Jay's dislike of the man; it was nothing tangible, nothing you could even talk about. But it struck Jay now

with peculiar dismay that Will Depew did not exist any longer. Jo-Jo was a widow. She might take up with this long, lazy buckaroo.

He had a slow, easy smile which he used a lot and he turned it now on Becky Crown. Becky was fascinated. She forgot her ham and eggs. She forgot Jay, whom she had been carefully ignoring, and Jay could feel himself disappearing. It was a disturbing sensation.

"Howdy, Becky! . . . Howdy, Mistah Crown! . . . Mighty glad to see you-all!"

Pomeroy's voice was thick with the pleasure of the meeting. It ran like thick molasses.

Becky ate it up, the way she had eaten the ham and eggs and biscuits. Very daintily, but with great relish.

"Mr. Pomeroy," she said. "What are you doing here?" She seemed to be as much surprised and as pleased as if she had met him on a desert island.

"I'm heah for the same reason Mistah Crown is, I reckon—looking fo' that cattle buyah. Of co'se," he added apologetically, "Don't know whethah I can interest him in my little bunch of stuff or not."

"Why, I don't see why not!" Becky said.

Pomeroy had interested *her* in his stuff, at least.

Crown said, "Oh, he's interested in getting all the stuff he can. But he's a damned aggravating man to do business with. Always late."

"How much stuff you sellin', Mistah Crown?"

"Four or five thousand head."

"Imagine that!" said Pomeroy, in awe. "I know he won't go out and look at my stuff, now."

"Of course he will. How many you got?"

"Oh, not more'n a hundred head." He turned to the girl. "And what are

you doin' in Salliseen, Becky? Never saw you in our little ol' town befo'."

"It's been a long time. I made papa bring me. He's always telling what an interesting place it is."

"And do you find it an interestin' place?"

"Oh, very much. Nothing really exciting ever happens in White Springs. I just go to school and church all the time. Thank goodness, that's about over."

Pomeroy smiled broadly. "You-all goin' to quit goin' to church?"

"I mean I'm nearly through school. Then I'm going to make papa let me come and live on the ranch."

"That'll be great! Sho' will!"

"How far is your ranch from Papa's?"

"My little ol' shack is about ten miles from the Big House. Reckon that's wheah you-all will be."

"Will we, Papa?"

Crown pushed back his chair and lighted a cigar. "We haven't decided about that yet. If Becky wants to stay at the ranch next summer, that'll be all right. But I'm sure we won't move out there. You know, we have other kids to keep in school."

As an afterthought, he proffered a cigar to Pomeroy, who accepted it reverently. "Thank you, suh! Thank you!"

The cowman suddenly remembered Jay. "Have a cigar?"

"Nope!" said Jay, shortly. "Don't smoke em." He pulled out the makings and rolled himself a cigarette. "I'll have to be gettin' on, I guess."

NOBODY said anything as he walked away. He was filled now with disgust and resentment. Pomeroy had started it all, but his resentment was not confined to Pomeroy. It included Crown and his daughter.

"Think they're mighty high-toned,

don't they?" he snorted. "Think I'm just a bum, don't they? Well, to hell with 'em!"

He walked across the street to the Fandango and was shocked to find the place closed for the first time in his memory. Always the Fandango had been there to cheer and comfort a man when nothing else did. He looked at the wreath on the door and felt a very personal loss.

Someone called his name and he turned to face Sheriff Cain.

"Come up to my office," said the sheriff.

"You arrestin' me?"

"No!"

Jay went along with him. "Why don't you arrest me?"

"What for?"

"That railroader wanted you to."

The sheriff muttered savagely, "You keep pesterin' me, and I *will* throw you in! This ain't no jokin' business."

"Who's jokin'?"

The sheriff obviously wasn't. He strode on without answering. At the jail, he led the way through the main office into his private room.

Baxter was sprawled in the big leather armchair at the desk, looking as though something had fallen on him and mashed him into it. He glared at Jay through puffed, blackened eyes. Jay grinned. He knew that he looked pretty bad, but not that bad.

The sheriff sat down and motioned Jay to a chair. "I don't think you realize the seriousness of this case," he said, frowning heavily.

"Looks pretty serious, all right," Jay agreed, inspecting Baxter. "You tried beefsteak? That's the best thing I know."

Baxter writhed to a more upright position. A sixshooter was lying on the desk in front of him. Jay couldn't dope that out.

"Go on! Make a joke out of it if

you can!' bellowed the sheriff. 'You haven't got sense enough to set down and talk things over!'

'Well, I'll set down anyway.' Instead of taking the chair the sheriff indicated, Jay picked one to the left of Baxter, where he could watch him and the sheriff at the same time—and the gun on the table. 'I'll let you do the talkin'. I always like to listen to smart folks talk.'

'All right. Listen. We can't afford to let this thing come to a trial.'

'What thing?' Jay asked innocently.

'The killin' of this railroad hand!'

'Oh, that. There's so many things around here that *don't* come to trial, I didn't know just what—'

'Listen to me! If the railroad wants to get behind this thing, they will cause us all kinds of trouble.'

'Us?'

'Yes, all of us. We've got to stand together.'

'Why?'

The sheriff seemed about to choke. 'Are you workin' for the railroad now?'

'No,' Jay said. 'But that's an idea. Maybe they'll give me a job.'

THE sheriff got up and walked the floor a couple of times. He seemed to get control of himself. He stopped in front of Jay, and Jay couldn't see Baxter well enough to suit him, so he slid over to another chair.

'Set still!' roared the sheriff. 'I'm talkin' to you!'

'Go on, sheriff. I'm listening.'

The sheriff sat down again with an air of great patience. 'You know what happens if the railroad comes in here. It puts you and all the other freighters out of business.'

'You seem to be mighty worried about us freighters, sheriff. Now, if I had a good job like you—'

'You know damn well I own half of

the Big Chief Freight Line.'

Jay pretended surprise. 'You and Baxter partners? Well, well!'

'What you might not know is that we're operatin' on borrowed money. The bank is scared. They want us to pay off. We can't. We've got to keep our wagons rollin'. The only way to do that is keep the railroad out. And, by God, we'll keep it out!'

He stared at Jay for a long time. Baxter's glare hadn't shifted for an instant. But it wasn't the glares and stares that bothered Jay. It was that gun on the table.

'What we want to know is,' the sheriff went on, slowy, 'are you with us in this fight?'

Jay considered. 'I'm not in favor of killin' off the railroad hands. They've got too many of 'em. I don't think you can keep the railroad out that way.'

The sheriff made a growling noise, got a grip on the arms of his chair. 'We don't intend to kill off all the railroad hands. We may not have to kill any more. But we do have to see to it that Baxter ain't convicted of killin' this man. It would ruin our chance of gettin' public support. Don't you see that?'

Jay shook his head. 'We don't deserve 'public support' if we go in for killin'. I think Baxter ought to be convicted for that. And I think you ought to be kicked out of office for tryin' to protect him.'

He waited for that to soak in. He was getting mad, but not too mad to know exactly what he was saying and what it meant. He had made plenty of enemies already, and now he was taking on Sheriff Cain, the most powerful and popular man in the country.

'And I don't see,' he went on, 'how you're goin' to keep Baxter from comin' to trial, if that foreman pushes it. Like he says, he's got the railroad behind him.'

There was nothing but stares and silence for awhile, then the sheriff arose and stepped to the door.

"Bring in that railroad man," he ordered.

Presently, the foreman was shoved into the room by a deputy, who then withdrew, closing the door.

"Here's the two men you accused," said the sheriff, slowly. "Do you still say they are the ones?"

The foreman, disheveled and red-eyed, appeared to have had a tough night. "Yes, I still say it! And I'll keep on sayin' it, and when I get out of this place—"

"Is this your gun?" asked the sheriff, indicating the weapon on the desk.

The foreman laughed harshly. "My gun? I didn't have no gun. I wish to hell I did!"

"Are you sure you didn't have this gun?" the sheriff persisted.

"I didn't have no gun!"

"Take a look at it. Is that your initials on the handle?"

AS the foreman picked up the six-shooter, Baxter pulled his gun and fired twice. The foreman sagged down upon the desk, clung to it for a moment, then fell heavily to the floor.

"I thought he had you for a minute there, sheriff," said Baxter, "when he made a grab for that gun."

The sheriff answered carefully, "Yes, he almost got me. That was good work on your part."

They were watching Jay. They were ready for anything he might do. Baxter still held his smoking gun.

Jay knew they would kill him if they could. Maybe they thought they could right now.

The sheriff said, quietly, "Baxter could shoot your damned head off. He could keep you from talking any more."

It must have been an order, or at least a strong suggestion. The strain

was showing on Baxter. All he had to do was turn his gun.

"If he shot you I could swear you tried to kill him," the sheriff explained. "Or I could say you and the railroader got into a fight, and killed each other. Oh, yes, I could fix that up all right."

Jay nodded. "I'm sure of that, sheriff. You've been fixin' things up like this for a long time, I reckon."

Baxter was fairly straining at that gun, trying to turn it on Jay. The muscles of his arm twitched visibly, as though some were pulling one way and some the other.

Sweat gleamed on the sheriff's face. Jay was the calmest man in the room.

"I'm just tellin' you what *could* happen," said the sheriff. "I don't want it to happen. I might be able to talk Baxter out of it, if you'll promise to keep your mouth shut."

Jay considered, not his proposal, but his chances of living or dying.

"Well," said the sheriff, "what are you goin' to do about it?"

What was he going to do? Just what any man would do, with his life at stake. He would fight. He might lose. But he would fight, and keep fighting as long as he could lift a hand.

"I'm goin' to shoot the heart out of Baxter," he said, "and I might get around to putting a slug or two through you—if you start anything."

He believed that he could do it. He believed it so strongly that he sounded convincing.

"Baxter's got the drop on me," he went on, just saying out loud what he was thinking, "and he'll get me first. But one slug won't stop me, unless he happens to get me just right. And he won't. He ain't much with a gun. He's all right when the other man ain't got a gun. But he knows that I'll get him, and he won't send that first one straight enough. Before he can shoot again, I'll be throwin' lead. He knows that. You

know it, sheriff."

Yes, the sheriff knew it too. "All we want of you is to keep your mouth shut. Will you promise that?"

"No!" He had them whipped, now. He had Baxter backing down. If the sheriff tried to do anything, it would be an even draw—and Jay wasn't worried on that score.

He watched them both, as he walked to the door and threw it open. In the outer room, two deputies were tensely waiting, and now other people, aroused by the shot, were coming in.

"No, sheriff, I couldn't promise to keep my mouth shut. I'd starve to death."

AS Jay moved away, Baxter's fury-flattened voice reached him. "You'll never *starve* to death, Jay-bird!"

Jay found the threat easy to ignore. In the light of what he had just seen, words didn't count very much. When a man couldn't believe what he saw, how could he believe what he heard?

He had seen a man killed in cold blood in the sheriff's office under supervision of the sheriff. What if he went around telling people that? Nobody would believe him. Sheriff Cain had a peculiar hold on the imagination of a hero-loving public. He was something venerable and invulnerable, something out of the past, something that every man was proud of. He was a little bit of Wild Bill Hickok, and Wyatt Earp, and Buffalo Bill Cody. He was The West.

Alongside of him, Jay was just a clown, a fly-by-night mule skinner, a trouble-maker. Furthermore, he was alone in this fight.

How did it happen, if he was so right, why everybody else was so wrong? If he could just find somebody else on his side, somebody that he knew—

He thought of Jo-Jo. She hated Bax-

ter, but her hatred was a personal thing, entirely apart from the railroad fight or any right and wrong. He thought of Dudley Crown, but didn't know him well enough to go to him and talk it over.

So he went to the barn and talked to his mules. He hitched them up and talked to them all the way to the mines. It was kind of comforting, talking to a bunch of jackasses that couldn't talk back. . .

The Fandango opened the day after the funeral of Will Depew. Among the customers that morning was Art Baxter. He found Jo-Jo behind the bar, arranging bottles and glasses.

He watched her warily for a little while, then approached. She looked at him in the mirror, but didn't turn.

"Jo-Jo, there ain't nobody sorrier over what happened then I am," he said.

She wiped the dust from a small shelf and lined up some tall quarts of whiskey. "All right," she said. "All right."

"You ain't holdin' it against me?"

She didn't answer for awhile. "I know you didn't mean to do it, Bax."

"Of course I didn't!" He grasped eagerly at this little encouragement. "You don't know how much I've been worryin' about it!"

She turned to him slowly. "Why have you been worryin' so much, Bax? Was you worryin' for fear I'd kill you?"

Baxter knew that there were a couple of sawed-off shotguns under the bar. "No!" he said. "No—you wouldn't do that!"

"Wouldn't I?"

"You—you just said you knowed I didn't do it on purpose!"

"But you done it, Bax. Didn't you?"

"Yes, but—"

"He's just as dead as if you'd done it on purpose."

"But listen, Jo-Jo! Accidents are

bound to happen sometimes and—"

"It wasn't an accident that you pulled your gun and started shootin'."

"But I was shootin' at Jaybird!"

"You wasn't shootin' very good. I could have done lots better than that. If I was goin' to shoot a man, I wouldn't blaze away hit-or-miss. I'd wait till I got my gun on him. And I'd be careful not to hit anybody else, if there was a crowd around."

HER voice was so low that it did not reach the group of men at the other end of the bar.

Baxter said hoarsely, "Don't talk like that, Jo-Jo! Don't look at me like that!"

She smiled. "You are afraid, Bax. You're afraid of me. A woman!"

"Hell, yes, I'm afraid of you, when you talk like that. You tried to kill me the other night, and you'd of done it if Cain hadn't got hold of you."

Jo-Jo nodded. "Yes, I'd have killed you, all right. And I thought that I would kill you the next time I saw you." Her eyes were dull, dry, and steady. Her face was colorless, and marked with tiny wrinkles.

She sighed. "But I guess it wouldn't do any good."

Baxter relaxed a little.

"Will is dead," she said. "Killin' you wouldn't change that."

"Of course it wouldn't," he said hastily, and then cowed at the look she gave him.

"Of course," she speculated, "it might rest his soul." Her stare went through him, and on into space. Her voice sank to a whisper. "Do you want me to do it, Will?"

Baxter held himself in rigid readiness. But what could he do, if she picked up a shotgun? Try to take it away from her? The bar was between them, and Baxter was not agile.

Try to shoot her? Baxter flexed his

stiffening fingers. A man had a right to protect his life. A man couldn't stand up and let a woman blow his head off with a shotgun! But there was a kind of paralysis creeping over him. He felt helpless and weak.

"No," she said, in the low eerie whisper, "I know you don't, Will. You're too good, Will. You always was. A thousand times too good for me."

Baxter broke out in a sweat of sudden relief.

He began to back away.

"Where are you goin'?" she asked sharply, coming back from the Great Beyond.

"N-nowhere," he said.

"What did you come in here for?"

"Why—just to s-see you, Jo-Jo."

"All right. Look at me."

His eyes were glued to hers, and he couldn't have dragged them away.

"What do I look like?" she asked.

"Why—you look like—you look all right. You look fine!"

"You're a liar!" She glared at him, her eyes coming alive. "I look like the devil, and you know it."

She turned to the mirror, looking at herself closely. He still couldn't get away, for his reflection was there beside hers.

"Look at the wrinkles!" she said.

"Look at the circles under my eyes. Look at my hair!" After a bitter silence, she said, "I'm old. I ain't pretty any more."

Baxter was torn between an impulse to retreat, and to stay there and be sympathetic.

He decided it was safer to be sympathetic. "You'll be all right in a few days, Jo-Jo," he said. "All you've got to do is fix yourself up a little. Put on some paint and stuff. You'll look just like you always did."

"Paint and stuff!" She swung about. "Then I'll look like a dance hall girl, won't I?"

HE didn't know what to say, so he kept quiet.

"I don't want to look like that!" she said. "Will didn't want me to look like that. He wanted me to be—decent. And I'm goin' to be! You hear me, Art Baxter? I'm goin' to be decent!"

He mumbled. "You've always been decent, Jo-Jo!"

"No, I haven't. I've been cheap. I've been mean. But I'm not goin' to be any more."

It was a great relief to Baxter to hear her say so, anyway. He couldn't think of anything meaner than shooting a man with a sawed-off shotgun.

"You're a fine woman, Jo-Jo!" he assured her fervently.

Her eyes softened. "You really think so, Bax?" she asked wistfully.

"You're damn right I do! You're the finest little woman I know."

"I ain't so little," she said.

"You're just the right size," he said admiringly. "You're constructed just right."

She liked it, and he went on recklessly, "I've always said you was the best lookin' woman I ever saw."

"I don't know as I like your taste, Bax. The kind of girls you pick."

There was color in her face now, and he was carried away by her swiftly returning allure. "There's just one woman I'd pick if I had a chance."

She looked startled. "You mean that, Bax?"

"Never meant anything as much as that!"

Silently, she inspected him. "Thanks, Bax. That helps. I'm glad I didn't shoot you."

She turned to her dusting, and Baxter laughed uncertainly. "You're a caution, Jo-Jo. A man never knows what you're goin' to do next. Reckon that's the reason I always liked you."

"And I always liked you," she said. "You are so different from Will. Just

the opposite. He was so good and kind and honest and gentle."

Again Baxter laughed, hollowly. "That ain't sayin' much for me."

"Will appealed to the good in me," Jo-Jo said. "And you, the bad."

Baxter began to preen himself. "Sure enough?"

"I've seen you fight," she said. "I've seen you smash heads, pick men up and slam them on the floor. I wish I could do that!"

"Huh?"

"There's some men I'd love to slam around like that, and I'd do it if I had your strength." She smiled. "See what I mean when I said you appeal to the bad in me?"

"I reckon so," he said uncertainly.

"You killed that railroader and then you killed the foreman that come after you," she went on. "You're takin' no chances on runnin' into a noose. I don't blame you. I'd do the same thing, in your boots. Right now, you're figurin' on killin' Jay Collins. You're afraid he'll shoot off his head—so you're goin' to shoot it off for him." Her smile was still there. Her voice was light and casual.

"Yeah?" he said. "You know a lot, don't you?"

"Why, everybody knows that."

"Humph!"

"I'm not blamin' you, understand. You're mean. You're a brute. You're a crook. I like you."

HE grunted again. "What kind of talk is that?"

"Don't you understand? The mean part of me likes you. When I'm mean, brother, I'm just as mean as you are."

He wondered if he shouldn't have left while the leaving was good. This woman was crazy. Her sorrow had affected her mind, no doubt.

"If I was you," she said, "I wouldn't try to kill Jay Collins."

"Why?" he growled, off guard. Then, "What makes you think I'm goin' to try that?"

"We'll skip the second question. My answer to the first is, Because it's too dangerous."

"Humph!"

"You know it is. You may put somebody else up to it—Soupy Cloughton, for instance. Soupy hasn't got any more sense than to try. Or Tiny Fritch. Tiny thinks he's a sweet little gunslinger. And he is. But he's not as good as Jay Collins. I've seen the Jaybird in action. Haven't you?"

"What's all this to you?" he growled.

"I'm just tellin' you what I'd do if I was in your place. I told you how you appealed to me. And it's easy for me to put myself in your place."

"I think you're just tryin' to scare me. You like him, don't you?"

"Jaybird? Not especially. He's too good. Not in the way Will was—but in a kind of a mean way. He'd kill a man just because he thinks it's the *right* thing to do. He'll fight for the right of the railroad to build a line in here, knowin' that it will put him out of business. You don't understand that, do you, Bax?"

"He's a double-crosser!"

She laughed a little. "Of course you don't." She added, thoughtfully, "I'm surprised he hasn't killed you, before this. I guess it's because he could do it so easy."

"The hell he could!" he said. "Then why don't he?"

"I just got through tellin' you. But that's something else you don't understand, Bax. That's another reason why I like you. You're so damn dumb."

After all the customary effort it took to get himself in motion, with all of his parts operating smoothly, Baxter turned haughtily and walked away.

He took his usual place at the teamsters' table in the corner, spreading

himself upon three armless chairs and picking up a deck of cards to riffle through them nervously and lay them out for a game of solitaire.

He played three games, watching the door, and warded off all attempts at conversation on the part of those who drifted by.

Presently, Soupy Cloughton came in, and Baxter ceased his solitaire game abruptly. Soupy came over to the table and sat down.

"Well?" grunted Baxter.

"It didn't come off so good."

"You messed it up?"

"I didn't," retorted Soupy. "Tiny Fritch did. He bragged so much about what a hell of a good shot he was. And he missed him. Not more'n two hundred yards away, and he missed."

BAXTER gathered up the cards with trembling hands. "You'd better clear out."

"Why me?"

"He'll know you done it."

"I didn't do it. Tiny Fritch done it, or tried to."

"Did he see you?"

"No."

"Nor Tiny?"

"No."

Baxter tried to shuffle the cards and they spilled all over the table.

"You're a little shaky, ain't you?" said Soupy. "Looks like you're the one ought to clear out."

"Why?"

"He'll know damn well you're behind it."

Baxter snarled. "I ought to done it myself! Why in hell did I ever leave it up to you?"

"Yeh. And why did you hold out for a dry-gulchin' job? I was willin' to tackle him face to face—me and Tiny."

"Well, it's not too late for that!"

Soupy looked toward the door. "Ain't it? Looks to me like it is."

Jay pushed through the doors, glanced quickly about, and came walking toward them. Baxter shoved back from the table. Soupy sat where he was, motionless.

About six feet away, Jay stopped. "I see you beat me back to town." He included both of them with the remark, and they exchanged trapped glances.

"What do you mean?" grunted Baxter.

"Don't try to weasel out of it. I'm goin' to give you a good, fair shot at me. You was too far away. You ought to do better at, say, six feet. I'm goin' to wait till you get your gun out."

"I don't know what in hell you're talkin' about!"

"Lyin' won't help you a bit, Baxter. You brought it all on yourself, when you shot at me this mornin', and missed."

"I didn't shoot at you! I been here all mornin'! Ask Jo-Jo! Hey, Jo-Jo!"

"That's old stuff. You pulled that one on the railroader."

Jo-Jo sauntered toward them.

"Ain't I been here all mornin', Jo-Jo?" Baxter asked.

"Sure you have. Why?"

Jay gave her a sardonic grin. "Always ready to lie for him, ain't you?"

"I'm not lyin'!" she said indignantly, adding, "—this time."

Jay studied her. "How long's he been here?"

"Oh, about two hours."

"Two hours? You're sure of that?"

Jo-Jo was sure. "Why? What's the matter?"

"Somebody tried to pick me off when I started down the Devilgate Grade a little while ago. My mules got away. They went over the cliff." He held Baxter with his stare. "It couldn't have been nobody but him."

"Why couldn't it?" asked Jo-Jo.

"Because he's the only one that's dirty enough to pull a trick of that

kind."

"Is he?" Jo-Jo was looking at Soupy.

"How long's *he* been here?" Jay asked.

"About five minutes."

"Is that so? Well, well!"

SOUPY said, "It wasn't me!"

Jay stared at him thoughtfully. "You and me had a little trouble the other night, Soupy, but I didn't think it went this far. If it did, I'm ready to settle it right now. With both of you."

Again the scurrying glances of Soupy and Baxter met. Soupy shook his head, and it seemed to be an evaluation of the assistance which he might expect from Baxter.

"You're barkin' up the wrong tree, Jaybird. There's no reason for us to start gun-fightin', now. I'm against you on the railroad, but so is everybody else."

Jay nodded slowly. "You're right on that, Soupy," he said, wearily. "Everybody's against me. I don't see how you can all be wrong. But I still think you are."

He turned away. "Give me a slug of whiskey, Jo-Jo."

She went around behind the bar and set out the bottle and glass. He poured down two drinks, and shook his head wryly. "That burns good," he said.

Jo-Jo put her elbows on the bar and leaned forward, looking earnestly into his face. "You're hard to kill," she said.

"Ain't no man hard to kill, if you put a bullet in him right. That dry-gulcher was just a bum shot. Hm-m-m. Wonder who it could of been?" He watched her with half-closed eyes.

"It could have been Soupy. It could have been Tiny Fritch."

"Why Soupy? Why Fritch?"

"They would do what Baxter tells them."

"Would they shoot a man in the back if Baxter tells 'em to?"

"Of course!"

Jay shook his head, poured another drink. "I don't believe it."

She laughed harshly. "You men get some funny ideas. The only way to get rid of 'em, I guess, is to have 'em shot out of your heads."

"Funny ideas? Like that?"

"Like thinkin' some men won't shoot you in the back, and some will. There are times when any man will shoot you in the back, if he hates you bad enough."

"No, Jo-Jo. You don't know about men, the good ones."

"Don't I? I was married to the best man that ever lived."

"Will? Of course. But he was—well, he wasn't the shootin' kind of a man."

"No, he wasn't. But I'm the shootin' kind of a woman!"

He spilled the liquor, trying to fill his glass again.

She put her hand on the bottle. "I wouldn't do that, if I were you." Her eyes shifted to the two men at the table.

He let her have the bottle. "Maybe you're right, Jo-Jo. Maybe I better keep right side up, huh?"

The doors swung widely, and Mark Pomeroy came in. He came to the bar and, not seeming to see Jay, beamed at Jo-Jo. "Howdy, theah! How you-all today?"

She smiled back at him. Women always did. Jay couldn't understand it. He looked this rangy buckaroo over, and decided nothing would please him so much as throwing him out of the place. He waited hopefully for him to make some crack which he could take exception to. But Pomeroy ignored him completely. Again he saw himself eliminated. He saw Jo-Jo's eyes warm up, and he saw that entranced look which had transformed Becky Crown.

"Mister," he said, taking Pomeroy by the arm and swinging him about,

"you're a rat."

POMEROY stared. "I beg yo' pardon?"

Jay micked, "What do you beg my pardon fo'? I said you was a rat."

He didn't see anything happening, but it happened just the same. Maybe he'd had too many drinks. Something hit him, and hit him hard. It must have been Pomeroy's fists. Possibly Pomeroy kicked him in the face at the same time, though he admitted that would be a difficult achievement.

He felt himself smashing backward into the swinging doors, and he came up against a hitching post. He lay for a minute in the warm sun. It felt rather comfortable. He didn't want to get up. He thought he would go to sleep. . . .

When he woke up he was in his room at the hotel and he was quite confused about what had happened.

"Somebody knocked hell out of me," he ruminated, rubbing his jaw. "It was that cow waddy—that long, lanky, gal-chasin' buckaroo! Who'd ever thought he packed a wallop like that?" He shook his head ruefully. "Well, maybe I had it comin' to me."

He was not so resigned when he thought of the encounter on Devilgate Grade. This attempt on his life was intended either as a warning, or it meant that they were taking no chances on him and were out to get him now. He was placed in the nerve-wracking position of having to wait and see. It was like sticking his head up, after a bullet had passed near him, to see if they were actually shooting at him. He knew who was behind it all, but he stood alone against public opinion; he would get only ridicule if he openly accused the sheriff, and he could not force Baxter into an open fight.

One of the most depressing things about it all was the loss of his mules and wagon. Somehow, it took the fight out

of him. He could see the wreckage now, lying at the bottom of the cliff, and it seemed to him the wreckage of his life.

It had taken years to acquire that outfit, and it represented all he had in the world. What was there for him to do now, even if he managed to escape Baxter's dry-gulchers?

Gloom settled over him deeper and deeper, but at last he began to get hungry. There were two things which usually cheered him up — eating and fighting. He was definitely fed up on fighting, but he realized it was about time for dinner.

His face was too sore to shave, so he compromised with a quick dash of cold water. He combed his hair, tucked in his shirt tail and was ready to leave when he heard voices in the hall. That of Mrs. Applejohn he recognized.

"Here's his room," Mrs. Applejohn was saying. "I hate to wake him up. He—just got in from the mines."

Jay opened the door.

"Oh, you're up!" said Mrs. Applejohn. "How you feelin' now?"

"Hungry," he said, glancing at the stranger.

"This is Mr. Steffner," she said. "He—" she dropped her voice—"he's from the railroad."

Steffner was a thick scowling man who wasted no time with handshaking. "I'm a special officer," he said. "I want to talk to you about the killing of Jack May."

"Who?"

STEFFNER scowled more deeply. "Now, don't give me that. You was there. You saw him bumped off."

Jay had thought he didn't want to fight any more. But he was about to change his mind. He thought he would like to sock this customer just once. "I reckon you're talkin' about that foreman. I didn't know what his name

was."

"Oh, you don't, huh? Well, his name was Jack May. You saw him killed, didn't you?"

"Yes."

"Ha!" Steffner turned to Mrs. Applejohn, who was taking it all in avidly. "Now, if you'll excuse us—"

"Why, sure. Just go right on."

"I'd like to talk to this man alone."

"Oh! Well, excuse *me*." She walked away, with one ear cocked toward them.

The railroad officer stepped into Jay's room and closed the door. "Now tell me just what happened," he said. "And be sure you tell it straight."

"Mister," said Jay softly, "I don't feel so good."

"Humph!" Steffner's scowl was not intended for a tonic. "What's that got to do with it? I just want you to tell me the truth about this killing."

"I usually tell the truth. It ain't because I'm too good to lie. It's just because I ain't good at it. I get all mixed up and don't remember what I said."

"Well, don't get mixed up on this, understand?"

"I won't. And don't you get mixed up, either. You ain't bulldozin' me into tellin' you anything. I'll tell you just what I damn please. And when I get through—well, I'll wait and see how I feel about it then."

The railroad officer lost a little of his belligerency. "I'm not trying to intimidate you."

"And you ain't, if I know what that means."

The other man smiled weakly. "Very well, Mr. Collins. I think we understand each other."

Jay sat down the bed and his visitor took the chair. It was a flimsy, cane-bottomed thing tipped back against the ledge of the open window.

"I'm goin' to tell you the whole shootin'-match, from start to finish,"

Jay said.

And he told it. Knowing that he was putting himself up as a target, knowing that Baxter and the sheriff would do everything in their power to carry out their threats, knowing that he was taking his stand definitely for the railroad and against his former friends.

Steffner thanked him warmly. "I'll clean up this mess!" he promised. "This'll probably get me a promotion."

"You want to be careful it don't get you something else."

"You mean—? I'm not afraid of 'em."

"Neither was this Jack What's-his-name. How do you figure on cleanin' up the mess?"

"Can I use you as a witness?"

"As long as I'm top side of the ground, you can."

"Are you afraid of them?"

"That don't make any difference," Jay explained patiently. "They're not goin' to let us get by with it, if they can help it. And you can see what they're willin' to do to stop us."

Steffner looked uncertain. "But *I'm* a special officer. I've got the railroad behind me!"

"Uh, huh. Seems to me I've heard that before. You go ahead and start the ball to rollin'. I'll testify for you, if you can get the case in court."

Steffner offered his hand. Jay hesitated a moment before he accepted it. "You know what this makes me, I reckon."

THE other man looked blank.

"Never mind. Keep your ears open. You'll hear the things they call me. Maybe. Anyway, keep your ears open. And your eyes."

He added, "I wouldn't stand in front of windows like that, either."

Steffner laughed. "Sounds like you're getting' jittery. This is all in a day's work for me. I've cracked some really

tough cases in my time, and this one will be easy. The first thing you have to do is let 'em know you're not scared of 'em. See? If they get the idea you're scared, you're licked to start with."

"And if you get a bullet in the back, wouldn't that lick you too?"

"They wouldn't dare to do that. Not to *me*."

He looked very sure of himself. He looked big and tough. He looked as if he were going to enjoy this fight.

And that was the way he died. Standing there inn front of the window, bragging about what he was going to do and what he had done in the past.

There was a rifle shot, and it didn't sound like much. Just a little sharp ping. It came from across the street, probably from some of the upper rooms in the Fandango.

Jay didn't stick his head out. He didn't want to see that bad. There wasn't a chance in a hundred he could have seen anything, anyway.

The accuracy of the shooting seemed to indicate that the man who did this was not the one who had tried to kill him. This one was closer, however, and he had a perfect target. He put the bullet squarely in the back of Steffner's head. There was no outcry and the man probably never knew what hit him. He died thinking what a hell of a good man he was, and Jay thought that was a very good way to die.

Jay was no more shocked than if the rickety chair had fallen down. He was not surprised. It was what he had expected, sooner or later. That it came now, before Steffner had a chance to tell what he had learned, seemed logical enough.

It was all logical, and accurate, and foretold. And Jay himself might be lying there if it were not for a good deal of luck and a little common sense. He would never stand with his back to a window, and he would never be foolish

enough to think, "They wouldn't dare do that—not to me!" But he would have to walk the streets, he would have to turn his back on danger every minute of the day, and the night.

It took strong nerves, and Jay thought he had them. But at the end of three days, he was not so sure. He kept more and more to his room, he drank a lot of whiskey, and didn't eat enough of Mr. Applejohn's good food.

Thus he saw very little of the other boarders, and he had almost forgotten about Dudley Crown and his daughter Becky when he encountered them in the lobby that evening. They were coming out of the dining room, and he was on his way to the Fandango.

HE was pleased to see that Becky had filled out a little but it might have been the dress she was wearing. It was a ruffled outfit, white and gleaming, and she seemed to float around in it.

"Oh, Collins!" said Dudley Crown in his lordly manner. "May I see you a moment?"

Jay waited for them to come to him.

"I haven't seen you the last day or two," Crown said, pleasantly.

"You been lookin' for me?"

"Well, yes."

"What do you want?"

"Why—I'd like to have a talk with you."

"All right." Maybe they expected him to be flattered by this attention, and he let them know he wasn't. He didn't want anything from them. They wanted something from him. Let 'em talk for it, and talk nice.

"Let's sit over here," said Crown, turning to some vacant chairs. "Becky, you can go up to your room."

"Oh, please! Can't I stay here and listen to you talk?" She gave the impression that it would be a great privilege, and Jay began to think she might

not be so high-toned, after all. He was in favor of letting her stay.

"I'm going to talk business with Mr. Collins," said Crown.

"I know," she said. "And I want to hear what he says."

Jay was feeling more charitable towards her all the time. She was smart. And tonight she was right friendly. He didn't know whether he could talk business much, with her around. What business did Crown have with him anyway?

"All right," Crown agreed. "You can stay if you'll keep quiet."

He talked to her as if she were a little girl, and maybe he thought she was. She didn't think so, and neither did Jay; they exchanged a look of complete understanding on this point.

"All right, papa," she said demurely. "You and Mr. Collins sit there, and I'll sit here." She took a chair on one side of Jay, and her father sat on the other side of him.

Jay was afflicted with a sudden attack of self-consciousness which put him to crossing his legs and uncrossing them, folding his hands and unfolding them.

"Are they really trying to kill you?" Becky's voice was breathless as she leaned toward him.

"Becky!" Her father's sharp reproach pulled her back in her chair.

"My daughter is all excited, as you can see," he went on, apologetically.

"I should think *you'd* be the one that's excited!" said Becky.

"Becky, if you don't keep quiet," Crown said sternly, "you'll have to go to your room."

Again she sank back in her chair.

"I should have sent her home a long time ago. In fact, I tried to. It isn't good for her, all this excitement."

"You just think it isn't!" Becky said. "I wouldn't miss this for the world. I had no idea these things actually hap-

pened and that men like Mr. Collins actually lived, outside of story books."

"Are you through?" Crown inquired dryly. "I think you've impressed Mr. Collins sufficiently."

Some of her childish wonder vanished, and she said in a decidedly grownup fashion, "Don't talk to me like that!"

"Becky—!"

"You've been trying to make him think I'm a child. I'm eighteen years old. I'm tired of being treated like a baby."

"All right, all right," Crown spoke placatingly. "Just keep quiet, won't you please?"

SHE appeared subdued, and Crown turned his attention to Jay. "As you probably know, I'm very much interested in getting the railroad in here. It will make it possible for us to increase our output at the mines, and it will do away with the long drive to White Springs with the cattle."

Jay nodded.

"I am well acquainted with the president of the railroad and other officials, in fact, I have a financial interest in the road."

Jay was not surprised to hear this. Dudley Crown had a financial interest in most everything that made money.

"I know what the situation is here, and I know what we're up against. I've taken the matter up with the governor and the attorney general, but I don't expect very much help from them, since they and the sheriff are on the same side of the political fence. Cain seems to have more power at the capitol than I do."

Jay was wondering where he came in on this; it all seemed far above his head. But he was fast losing his resentment against Dudley Crown. The man was human, after all—and it gave Jay a feeling of importance to be taken into

his confidence.

The way Becky was looking at him made him feel important, too—and a little dizzy. Of course, he had been drinking too much lately and not eating enough, and dizzy spells hit him every once in a while. But this was different. There was no attendant numbness to it, no gloominess. It whirled him up and gave him a glimpse of the world from on high—from Crown's point of view and Becky's.

"We've got to fight them on their own ground!" Crown declared. "That's where you can help us."

Jay didn't like to come back to the ground again, but that was where he belonged. Not soaring through the air with a girl who looked like she was floating on a cloud, not mingling with high politicians and men who owned mines and railroads and cattle ranches. But back on the ground, fighting.

"I have the authority to offer you an appointment as a special officer of the railroad," said Crown.

There was a magnificence to this statement which lifted Jay again. He tried to keep his feet on the ground, he tried to tell himself that he was just being offered a job with the railroad. But it sounded so much more important, the way Crown said it. Jay felt that a very special honor was being bestowed upon him. "An appointment as a special officer of the railroad!" Didn't that make him one of the "officials" which Crown had boasted of knowing so well? Didn't that put him up there in the same class with the financial backers of the railroad and the mines? And it put him much, much nearer Becky. He no longer had trouble with his hands and feet. It was just his head that was bothering him now.

"I talked to the president personally about you," Crown continued. "I explained that if there was a man in Salliseen Valley who could handle this situ-

ation, it was you. I told him that you were fair-minded from the start, willing to concede the railroad the right to build the branch line, although it would put you out of business. I told him you had opposed the murderous tactics of the local mob, and that you had lost your team and wagon, and stood in danger of losing your life. The president was very much impressed. He asked me to urge you to join us in this fight."

Join them? Jay was ready to go out single-handed and finish up the fight at once. He wished he could frame his acceptance of the honor in the exalted manner in which it had been extended to him, but the best he could do was: "You can count me in!"

AS a railroad special officer, Jay found that he was not an official of the company. He was just another "bull." His job had very little to do with railroading. He was charged with the duty of protecting the construction crew and guarding the work that had been completed. He was not quite a railroad man, nor quite an officer.

The most disappointing thing about it all was the necessity of staying in camp practically all the time. This might have saved his life, for it kept him out of Salliseen. But it also kept him from seeing any more of Becky. He heard that she had gone back to White Springs, and his ardor for his new job cooled considerably as he prowled about the camp and along the right-of-way, keeping tab on his guards and waiting for trouble that didn't come.

Just what Baxter and Cain would do could not be foretold. Steps were being taken to prosecute them, but this involved a lot of political bickering and legal investigation in which Jay had no part.

It was lonely in camp. It was boring.

He was among strangers, many of whom, knowing he had been a freighter, regarded him with suspicion or with the contempt due a traitor. In any event, he was an outsider. They were "railroaders" and proud of it—even the construction crew. They were scornful of the wagon freighters, whom they regarded as hopelessly behind the times. There were many Mexican workers, who spoke little or no English—none at all when you wanted them to do something.

Jay longed for the old crowd, a boisterous night at the Fandango—the horseplay, the music, the girls. And Jo-Jo. He hadn't seen Jo-Jo for a long time—not since he took the railroad job. He wondered what she would think about that. He thought he could count on her to be fair about it—much fairer than anybody else he knew.

He slipped off that night shortly after supper, not telling anybody where he was going. He knew he shouldn't go. If anything happened he would get all the blame, for he was in charge.

But nothing had happened so far, and never was a night more seemingly peaceful, as he saddled up and headed for town. He knew what to expect when he got there, but still he had hopes that it might not be so bad as it was. When he walked into the Fandango, he was hoping to find someone in that crowd who would give him a friendly welcome. It seemed to him that he had been away for years, when it had actually been but three weeks.

Familiar faces were everywhere: the old crowd was at the teamsters' tables, the music and the noise of people having a good time—all was there. It was great to be back. He was ready to shake hands all around, even with Art Baxter, and buy drinks for the crowd.

But there was no handshaking, there were no words of welcome for "the Jay-bird," there was no buying of drinks

for the crowd. Old friends looked at him, their faces hard, their eyes cold and scornful.

Nobody spoke to him. It would have been easier, perhaps, if they had said what they were thinking. Their silence condemned him without a hearing. He was left severely alone and made to feel like a despised outcast.

AS he stood at the bar, watching the scene of gaiety with a strange brooding bitterness, a voice full of warmth and pleased surprise, cried: "Jaybird!" It was the voice of Jo-Jo.

She came to him with outstretched hand. "Where in the world have you been?"

"I've been in hell," he said, and he took her hand and held to it. He saw others watching them, and he said sardonically, "Ain't you afraid you'll catch somethin'—gettin' so close to me?"

Her quick, wise glance included him along with the others. "You're takin' it pretty hard, ain't you? Didn't you know it would be like this?"

He shook his head. "I thought I did. But—oh, hell! What's the use talkin' about it? Glad to see you, anyhow. You're lookin' great. How about a dance?"

"I ain't dancin' any more, Jaybird."

"Why not?"

"I'm gettin' married."

He frowned. "Yeah? Who to?"

"Mark Pomeroy."

"You mean that—that—" words failed him.

Her bright amiability was suddenly gone, and she lashed out sharply. "What have you got against him?"

"Why—nothin'."

"Oh, I remember. He threw you out of here one day, didn't he? But it was your fault. You was tryin' to pick a fight with him. Why?"

"I don't know, Jo-Jo," he confessed.

"I just never liked his looks."

"What's wrong with his looks? He's the best lookin' man that ever set foot in this dump. He's a fine man, a *decent* man."

"Yeah? Well—I sure hope so, Jo-Jo, if you're goin' to marry him. You ought to have the best there is."

She softened immediately. "You're a good scout, Jaybird. I like you. I wish you knew Mark like I do. He's so—so clean, and so strong—" She broke off with a little laugh of embarrassment. "I'm talkin' like a school girl. And honest, Jay, that's the way I feel. I'm startin' life all over again. I'm gettin' out of this place. I'm goin' to be a rancher's wife!"

It hurt Jay to see her eyes shine so proudly, and he knew why she was marrying Mark Pomeroy. It wasn't because she cared so much for him. It was because she wanted to be a rancher's wife. Pomeroy could give her what she wanted most—"decency." And her brand of decency was so far above Pomeroy's, it was painful.

"I'm turnin' this place over to Abel Goodnight," she said. "I'm never goin' to stick my head inside these doors again. I'm goin' to have a home of my own—and kids, I hope. I'm goin' to be happy, and decent."

He said, "You've always been decent, Jo-Jo."

She beamed. "That's just what Art Baxter said!"

Jay regarded her ruefully. "Well, that's one thing me and Bax agree on."

Her attention was attracted by something, and Jay glanced over his shoulder to see what it was. Soupy Cloughton and Tiny Fritch were coming up to the bar. When they moved into the space beside Jay, he knew they were going to start something. He knew it because they pretended not to see him.

Jo-Jo knew it too. Her eyes narrowed and her lips tightened. She stepped past Jay as if she were going to

come between him and them. He put out his hand and stopped her. She looked into his eyes, then shrugged, and lifted her hand in a casual gesture of parting. "Well, take care of yourself, Jaybird."

"I will. You take care of yourself too."

SHE laughed shortly. "Don't worry about me."

Jay stood with his back to the bar, his right hand almost touching Soupy's elbow. He could scarcely see Tiny, on the other side of Soupy, and he moved out a little.

"All right, the drinks is on me!" Tiny's voice was unusually shrill. "But I want to know when you're goin' to pay me what you owe me!"

"I don't owe you nothin'," growled Soupy.

"You owe me a hundred dollars!"

"The hell I do!"

Tiny faced him, quivering with sudden rage. "You ain't goin' to pay me?" he yelled.

His acting was too good. Jay could see that the row was a fake, that there would be shooting, and that he was intended to be the "accidental" victim this time.

So he wasn't surprised when Tiny went for his gun. Jay was moving away from the bar at the time, and he twisted around Soupy, grabbed Tiny by the right shoulder, and dug his fingers in the back of Soupy's neck. He slammed their heads together.

This was not so successful, owing to the difference in their sizes. Soupy stood almost a foot taller than Tiny, and Soupy's stomach was in the way, also. Jay saw he would have to take them one at a time, and since Tiny had his gun out, he claimed first attention.

Jay slapped him with his open hand, so hard that the little gunman skidded down the bar, grabbing at it, but un-

able to stay on his feet. Soupy was trying to figure out what had happened, apparently, but he didn't have time. Jay buried his fist in the big man's stomach, doubling him up, then sent him reeling after his little partner.

They piled up together and sent customers scrambling. Jay had no intention of getting into the scramble. He stood back, ready to shoot it out with either or both of them.

Tiny must have come to a very quick decision. When he got back to his feet, he didn't have his gun. He expressed amazement at this sudden and unprovoked attack. He was furious. But he couldn't do anything about it just then, for he had lost his gun.

Jay offered to wait till he found it. In fact, he encouraged him to look for it. But Tiny was just so mad he couldn't see. This was the most outrageous thing that had ever happened to him. He had been having a friendly little argument with his friend Soupy, when Jay stepped in, skapped him down and then knocked Soupy on top of him.

Soupy didn't have much to say about it. Soupy still had his gun. But he contributed all he could to the general impression that it had been an unprovoked attack and that if he wasn't such a peaceful soul he would resent it.

Jay left the place, a scoundrel, a bully, a traitor. But he was not altogether displeased with himself and with the evening's entertainment.

His dismay came a little later. When he topped the hill at Devilgate Grade, he saw a small fire to the east and he had a premonition of trouble. As the fire leaped higher and its location became more apparent, he guessed what it was—the bridge at See-Saw River.

Jay held his horse to a steady lope, carefully measuring out the animal's strength against the miles to go, knowing there would be little or nothing he could do when he got there, but push-

ing on as hard as he could and cursing himself for leaving camp.

HE would be held responsible for this, and he felt his responsibility keenly. Had he been there, he probably couldn't have stopped it, but he believed he could at least have put the fire out by this time. Instead, it was increasing.

When he finally got there, he was amazed and chagrined to find that nobody was fighting the fire. There was no one in sight. He sent his horse scrambling up the approach to the burning bridge. The fire lighted the area on each side for hundreds of feet. It could be seen for many miles. There was no possible chance that the men at camp hadn't seen it.

He heard a yell and looked down to see a bunch of men beneath a tree, waving him back. As he turned his horse toward them, a large-calibered rifle bullet screamed past him. He realized then why no attempt was being made to put out the fire.

Hugging his saddle, he put his horse into a slide down the embankment. It was steeper than he thought. The horse sat down, fighting with all four feet, sliding directly toward a tree. Jay leaped to one side. The horse hit a side of the tree and skidded into a somersault. Back on its feet at the bottom of the grade, it started running.

Seeing that he couldn't catch the horse, Jay ran on to the men who had shouted the warning. They told him what he already knew, that whoever started the fire were guarding it now with rifles from various hiding places along the river.

The first two men who had gone up on the bridge with ropes and buckets had been shot. This had so terrorized the entire crew that no attempt had been made to seek out the hidden riflemen.

Nor would any attempt along that line be made, Jay could see, by anyone except himself. These men had been hired to build a railroad, not to fight a gun-battle. They had nothing to fight with.

Jay worked his way back to the top of the bank and moved down the river in the direction from which the shot had come. He knew what a good target he made in the light of the fire, and he moved quickly from tree to tree, pausing now and then to look about.

It was perilously uncertain, and he was at a big disadvantage not only because he had no idea which tree might hide a foe, but because they had rifles and he had only a sixgun.

When he was about two hundred yards from the bridge, he thought he saw a man's head and shot at it. When he discovered that it was a bird's nest, he felt a little foolish. Later, he plainly saw a hat. That was all. Just an old discarded hat, lying in the brush below the road.

A gun barrel gleaming in the firelight caught his eye, and he dropped to the ground as the rifle cracked. He scrambled forward to the cover of some brush and found that it did not conceal him. A bullet raked him across the shoulder blades as he crouched there.

The nearest tree of any size was about ten yards back, while in front of him slightly farther was another one. He chose to go forward, because the one in front would put him closer to the rifleman.

WHEN he reached the tree, still unhurt, he saw another one that beckoned him still forward, and then another. Suddenly the man with the rifle leaped up and started running. He was almost a hundred yards away. Jay stopped, took quick aim, and fired twice. The fleeing man hit the ground.

Jay approached him cautiously, but

there was no need to be cautious. The back of the man's head was smashed in. Jay knew who he was—Mack Potter, a mule-skinner who had worked for Baxter. Not a man who would have started trouble himself, and he probably had little to do with the firing of the bridge. He had been but a tool of Baxter's, and Jay felt only a sense of despair to think that men like Baxter and Cain could start a fight that would result in the killing of many a man like this, while they managed to keep safely out of it.

He moved rapidly down the river, then back along the edge of the water. It was too late now to save the bridge. The central span was crumbling, and blazing timbers were falling into the river.

Jay watched with a bitterness which could have been no greater had it been a personal loss. He felt that he had failed on his job. He had been given the specific task of protecting this property. Dudley Crown had been depending upon him, the president of the railroad had been depending upon him; and he had let them down. . . .

It was noon of a very hot day one week later, and Jay, along with a bunch of workers, was stripped to the waist, washing up for dinner. Among the three riders who came single file down the footpath from the general foreman's shack, Jay was first aware of Becky, then her father, and then a stranger—a sour-faced, elderly man in the lead. The general foreman was walking behind the cavalcade.

Jay thought: Here's where I get it!

He grabbed his shirt and got it on, self-consciously poking in his shirt-tail as the trio rode up. He was dripping wet, unshaven, and about as nearly unprepared for a meeting of this kind as possible.

"You—lookin' for me?" he asked, as the general foreman came hurrying for

ward.

The sour-faced man stared at Jay. "Is this the man?" he asked.

"Yes, sir," said the foreman, "this is Jay Collins."

Jay looked at Crown but found little encouragement in his expressionless face. He saw that Becky was smiling, in a particularly impish way, he thought.

"I want to congratulate you, sir!" said the sour-faced gent.

"Me?" Jay muttered. "What for?"

"For killing one of those scoundrels who burned the bridge down."

Jay had felt only a deep regret over the killing, and he was quite sure there was nothing in it that called for congratulations.

"Mack Potter wasn't no scoundrel," he said.

"What's that?"

"He was just a mule-skinner. I know 'em all. They're not mean. They're just sore at the railroad, and you can't blame 'em much for that. What I blame 'em for is lettin' Baxter talk 'em into doin' things like that."

"Humph!" The old man glared. "You talk as though you were in sympathy with these rascals!"

"I reckon I am."

"And you're working for me?"

"I don't know. Who are you?"

THE foreman interposed hurriedly, "This is Mr. Clements!"

"Who?" said Jay.

"The president!"

Jay carefully concealed any sign of the respect and awe he felt. He grinned and said, "Glad to meet you."

The hard stare of the railroad president wavered a little, and a gleam came through. "And I'm glad to meet you, sir!"

Being called "Sir" was a new experience for Jay, and he decided that he

"You know, Mr. Crown, I understand," the other other man went on. "And Becky."

"Yeah! You bet! Howdy do—sir," Jay said to Crown.

Crown's affable response was lost on Jay for he was getting the full benefit of Becky's smile now. It told him she had known all along that he thought he was going to get bawled out. It told him that she was very much pleased.

Her pleasure was his, expanded a hundred times. Nothing had ever pleased him so much, and in such a way. His pleasures had always been largely of the senses—something he could taste or feel or see or hear. This was something different. It was of the spirit, but it had a miraculous effect on him physically—more than anything he had ever eaten or drunk or seen or heard. It made a balloon out of his head, and he floated through the clouds.

Even so, there were good hard facts to stand on. Hadn't the president of the railroad come to congratulate him? It made no difference that there was nothing to congratulate him for. It had happened, and Becky had heard it. Becky was pleased with him. He was again in the charmed circle which included only the most important people. High-toned people. But damned good people too. They were just as good as mule skimmers.

It came to Jay suddenly that, while he had lost his old friends and still felt the loss keenly, he had the opportunity of making new friends—and they might be better than the old ones. This new idea swept him like a fire out of control.

The fire kept burning throughout the afternoon and evening. In fact, it got hotter and hotter. Becky stayed in camp, and Jay showed her around. She was fascinated with everything, and Jay discovered marvels in the customary drabness of the camp. It was wonderful to stand and watch a man swing-

ing a pick; it was something marvelous to see a span of mules drag out a scraper of dirt.

All wonders ceased when Mark Pomeroy rode into camp. Becky saw him first, and she promptly lost all interest in the marvels of railroad building.

"Mark!" she exclaimed, as though she had discovered something far more wonderful than the things which had been thrilling her. "What are you doing here?"

It wasn't so astonishing since his ranch was nearby, but it seemed to astonish her as much as it pleased her. Jay remembered the meeting he had witnessed between them in the Applejohn Hotel, and then she had called him "Mr. Pomeroy."

Now, as then, Jay felt himself disappearing, absolutely vanishing in thin air. Neither Becky nor Pomeroy seemed to know he was there.

"Howdy, Becky!" Pomeroy's sweet-molasses voice turned Jay a little sick. "How are you-all?"

"I'm fine! How are you?"

"Jus' fine!"

POMEROY stood with his hat in his hand, bending forward with a smirk, looking at her the way he looked at all women, and Jay managed barely to keep control of himself.

"I was just lookin' fo' yo' fathah," he said.

"Oh! You were looking for *him*."

"Well, I — I was hopin' I'd see you, of co'se." But Pomeroy was beginning to show signs of uneasiness. Jay's stare was having some effect. It was the only way he could warn the man. He couldn't tell him, straight out: "Tell her you're married, you rat! Tell her about Jo-Jo!"

No, he couldn't put it in words, but he could put it all in that stare.

"They told me that yo' fathah was out heah, so I come out heah lookin' fo'

him—"Pomeroy's glance cut across Jay's stare, and must have got its message:

Tell her, damn you, or I will!

"I—wasn't expectin' to see you," Pomeroy went on nervously. "When you went back home, I—I thought as like as not I'd nevah see you again."

"Oh, Mark! You knew better than that!"

"No, I didn't—Honest! I thought you was mad at me, and—"

"Just because you tried to kiss me?"

He reddened and again glanced nervously at Jay. "Wheah is yo' fathah?"

"He went back to town with Mr. Clements. He's probably at the hotel."

"Well, I'll be goin' along, I reckon. I've got to see him."

"I'll go with you," she said.

Then she seemed to remember Jay. "Oh! Thank you so much for showing me around. I had a wonderful time!"

There was a roaring in Jay's head, and a clamoring all through him which said: Stop her! Tell her about that skunk! Don't let her go off with him!

But he stood there and let her go. He didn't see her again for almost two months.

They were two months of torture, which was only partially inflicted by Art Baxter and Sheriff Cain and the freighters who were apparently willing to go to any lengths to stop the railroad. Workmen were shot at and terrorized, work trains were dynamited, and bridges destroyed. Jay never slept at night, and not much in the day. He was given authority to hire all the guards he needed, but it was hard to find men who were willing to take the job. He knew that Clements and Crown were exerting all the influence they had to get a troop of state militia called out, and he fought fiercely to stop the outrages himself. It was his job, not the militia's.

He knew there was just one way to

stop all opposition: Kill Art Baxter and Sheriff Cain. But he knew if he killed Sheriff Cain he would be jailed and probably hung. And he couldn't carry on much of a fight from behind bars, or with a broken neck.

All of this was bad enough, but the real torture came in knowing that Mark Pomeroy had been making regular trips to White Springs. He didn't know whether or not Becky knew Pomeroy and Jo-Jo were married. He didn't know for sure that Pomeroy went to White Springs to see Becky, but he knew Becky lived there, and that was enough to make him miserable.

A thousand times he swore he would go to see her and find out the truth. And a thousand times he told himself he couldn't get away from camp, the way things were. Anyway, it was a good excuse to keep him from going, to keep from learning the truth.

HE was afraid of the truth, for he didn't know Becky. All he knew about her was that she was something desirable and unattainable, something that made his head feel like a balloon and his heart like a three-inch pump, and other times made him feel like a pan of dirty dish water dumped out the back door of the cookshack.

He was riding through the Cobleskill Mountains above the railroad right-of-way near the new tunnel when he heard shooting. It was too far way to be aimed at him, but it meant more trouble just the same. He pulled off the road and cut through a grove of yellow pines to reach a bluff from which he could look down on the country below.

Before he had gone half a mile, he heard hoof beats and stopped behind a screen of buckbrush. After waiting a moment he rode on watchfully.

When he caught a glimpse of a saddled horse, he stopped again, slipping

his Winchester from its scabbard. As a figure arose near the horse, Jay snapped the gun to his shoulder, to lower it almost immediately. This was a girl.

He stared for a moment before he realized that it was Becky. Coming upon her this way, suddenly and completely unexpectedly, gave him all the feelings he ever had about her—all at once. It was enough to shake him up, and he kept his hands locked upon the saddle horn.

"What—are you doin' here?" he managed to say as he rode forward, and remembered that was the way she had twice greeted Pomeroy. It had seemed silly to hear her say it, but now he knew how astonishing could be a simple thing like seeing a person unexpectedly, a person you had been thinking about for two months.

She appeared even more astonished to see him. "It's *you!*" she cried in a choked voice.

A man lay on the ground near her, and one look at him told Jay that he was another victim in this fight. There had been so many, he was getting used to stumbling over bodies, especially on wooded roads like this. He wasn't at all surprised—not till he saw who the victim was: Mark Pomeroy.

Mark Pomeroy had taken no part in the railroad fight. But he was dead—shot, no doubt, for some one else.

Jay was not prepared to shed any tears. Death had become commonplace with him, and he had felt more regret over the death of some of his open enemies than he felt for this man. Shooting Mark Pomeroy might have been somebody's mistake, but not a very bad one. Rather a good one. Jay was willing to concede.

Then he looked at Becky's white, strained face, and at the carbine on her saddle, and suddenly changed his mind. About everything. Looking at her, he

knew the shooting of Mark Pomeroy had been no mistake.

She said, in a hard dry voice, "You knew he was married, didn't you?"

Jay wished to God that somebody *had* shot Pomeroy by mistake. Instead of this. Anything, instead of this. "Yes," he said. "I knew it."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"I—tried to."

SHE was holding herself so straight and still she seemed to be lifeless. Jay wanted to tell her that he didn't blame her for shooting the man, that he ought to have been shot a long time ago, but he couldn't speak.

Becky suddenly crumpled. He reached for her, and she was in his arms, crying. He didn't try to talk to her. It would have done no good just then. He believed she was finding more relief in her tears than she could in his talk, and he hoped she was finding some comfort in his arms.

He had dreamed of holding her in his arms, but it wasn't at all the way he had dreamed it. There was no thrill to it, but a warm vast tenderness spreading over him. He wanted only to protect and comfort her.

Suddenly, he realized how he could do it. If there seemed to be any chance of her getting into trouble over this, he could take the blame. He wouldn't look upon it as blame, but an honor. He would say that he had killed Mark Pomeroy!

"Take me—away from here!" she said.

He put her on the horse and they rode away without another word. She was silent for a long while, and then she pulled her horse to a sudden stop. "We can't go in together, like this! I didn't see you—and you didn't see me!"

That fitted in with his plan exactly. "All right, you just stick to that!" he said. "You didn't see me at all!"

She whirled her horse. "You go on to camp. I'll go back to town. Let somebody else find him. Let them try to find out what happened!"

"That's right," he approved. "Let 'em try to find out!"

He watched her retrace the distance they had rode, and swing wide around the place where Pomeroy's body lay, then disappear down the road toward Salliseen.

As he continued on toward camp, he was still in a daze. So many things had happened in such a short time and he had been only a spectator—things that amazed and stirred him as nothing had ever done before. Some of these things were good and some of them bad, and his consternation was hopelessly mixed with his rejoicing.

Mark Pomeroy was dead and that was good; Becky had killed him and that was very bad. He had held Becky in his arms, which was so good he couldn't yet believe it; but Becky had been so upset it had meant nothing at all to her.

He realized that it was all bad as far as Becky was concerned. He tried to imagine what she was going through right now, and what an experience like this would do to her. That was the worst part of it—not just the possibility that she might be charged with the killing. He could step in and help her if it came to that, but he could never shoulder her real trouble: Taking up with a man like Pomeroy, finding out about him, shooting him. Of course he should have been shot, but not by Becky. He should have been shot before Becky ever saw him.

"I ought to killed him myself, that night he throwed me out of the Fandango," he muttered. "Wonder why I didn't? I was drunk, that's why. I didn't know what I was doin'."

This plea, often made in defense of a killing, Jay made for himself now in

defense of not killing this man. But it was a poor defense. It didn't satisfy him, any more than it usually satisfies the law.

HE WAS so much involved in this case against himself that he failed to notice two riders on the road ahead until he was almost face to face with them. They were Tiny Fritch and Soupy Cloughton. They sat their horses, motionless, ready to go for their guns—hesitating perhaps only because he had completely ignored them and they had every reason to think he was baiting them into just such a play. Jay Collins wasn't blind. He wouldn't go riding through the timber without looking what was ahead of him. They were too cunning to fall into this "trap."

"Well," said Jay, "what are you waitin' on?"

They didn't answer. They cut their eyes to the right and the left, as if expecting to find themselves surrounded.

"Maybe you're waitin' on the train," he prodded. "Maybe you're goin' to take a trip—yes, maybe you are!"

"We're goin' to town, that's all," growled Soupy.

"Not down this road, you ain't!"

"This ain't railroad right-of-way! You can't stop us from ridin' this road."

"Can't I?" Jay was wondering if he hadn't better try to stop them for good. If they went on they would find the body of Mark Pomeroy. Then they would jump to conclusions.

"Not by yourself, you can't!" They were still looking for hidden opposition.

"You won't find anybody hidin' in them trees," said Jay, for the purpose of confirming them in their belief.

"You've got guards all over this country. You ain't foolin' us!"

"You're foolin' yourselves, because you want to. You don't want to settle it right here. Two to one ain't odds for you."

They exchanged knowing looks. They were smart hombres. "You ain't goin' to hook us into nothin'," said Tiny. "We got nothin' to settle with you."

"You like to have your heads cracked together? Didn't that make you mad? Don't you want to fight?"

Tiny smiled thinly. "Not now, we don't."

He reined his horse suddenly from the road and took off through the timber. Soupy, after a moment's hesitation, followed. Jay made no further effort to stop them. He watched them make a wide cautious circle, with the evident intention of coming back to the main trail, and he saw them when they found Mark Pomeroy.

After that he rode on, knowing that they would assume he had killed the man and would make that report to the sheriff. It would give the sheriff a lawful opportunity to take him into custody. And once in the sheriff's custody, he knew what would happen to him.

Sheriff Cain and Art Baxter had been trying to get him for a long time. Nothing would suit them better than this. He couldn't afford to submit to arrest. However, if the sheriff got the idea that he killed Mark Pomeroy, that would divert any possible suspicion from Becky. Any risk he could take to accomplish this purpose would be worth while. He hoped that Soupy Cloughton and Tiny Fritch wouldn't see her. If they went on toward Salliseen, they might.

He climbed an open ridge where he could get a better view. There were Cloughton and Fritch, riding on towards town, riding fast. He could see no sign of Becky. Would they overtake her?

THERE was nothing he could do about it now. If he started after them, they would only ride that much faster. Becky, too, had been riding fast.

She would, he fervently hoped, keep out of their sight . . .

When Becky topped a rise in the road and looked back to see two men pounding after her, she lashed her horse on frantically. Shocked and bewildered and really scared for the first time in her life, she wanted only to get away from there as fast as she could.

What terrible mess had she got into, anyway?

She had slipped away from home the day before, unable to bear the suspense any longer. Mark was three days late. He had promised to come for her and they would go to Winegate Falls and be married. Then they would come back home and tell the folks.

It would be a lot more exciting that way, and she would be surer of getting Mark, too. He was so shy. She couldn't prod him into going to her father and talking it over with him. She could understand, now, why he had been so shy about that. Any man would be shy about taking on a second wife.

Why hadn't he come right out and told her? Why hadn't somebody told her? Jay had known it, everybody must have known it, but her. What a sap she had been! What a gullible, silly, little fool!

But she had thought she was in love with him, and being in love was such a crazy, dopey, cockeyed thing! How could anybody in love be anything but silly? That's what love was—pure silliness. It was blackness too. It was sickness. It was despair. It was death and danger and scandal—the kind of love she had gone in for.

She couldn't have fallen in love with some of the dozens of unclaimed, fancy-free, respectable men who were always hanging around. Little Becky had to pick on a married man. One who didn't have honor enough to tell her he was married. One who promised to "elope" with her. And he might have done it!

In a way, she was glad he was dead. She was only sorry that Jay had killed him. She didn't want Jay to get into any more trouble. He had trouble enough.

He was the kind of man, of course, who would always be in trouble. And yet he seemed to like it, always so cheerful, always so willing to start a fight, or finish one. She often thought about the first time she had seen him, sailing out of that saloon. She had been nearly scared out of her wits, and he had been so comical.

She liked him and she knew that he was in love with her. But she had been in love with Mark. She had been so sure that Mark was a perfect gentleman, and so sure that Jay was a hopeless roughneck.

And she had been one hundred percent wrong. And now Jay had killed Mark, insanely jealous of him, probably learning that he had intended to betray her. And she was running away, leaving Jay to face the music alone!

But it was best for her to run away. If anybody knew that she was there, she would be hauled in as a witness. And they might get the truth out of her, somehow. She might have to tell them that she had been riding alone on this road, wondering what in the world she was going to do now that she had learned Mark Pomeroy was a married man, and how she had heard a rifle shot and gone on to find Mark lying dead, and then how she had seen Jay hiding in the trees . . .

No, it was best for her to run away. Surely, it was best for her to get away from these two riders who were trying to catch her!

SHE tried. She ran the legs off of her horse, and still they were gaining on her. So she pulled off to one side, dodging through the trees. She got about a half a mile farther, and then

the horse took a tumble. Becky jumped, but not quick enough.

Her right leg was pinned for an awful instant beneath the rolling horse. She tried to get up, and couldn't. There was no pain, there was no feeling in her leg at all. She was afraid to look at it. For a little while she lay, looking through the trees up at the sky, completely crushed by this final catastrophe.

Everything had happened to her, now. Everything. First, a broken heart, and now a mangled leg. She was much more concerned about her leg than her heart.

When she got up the courage to examine it, she found to her joy and amazement it was still attached to her body and there were no broken bones protruding through the flesh. It looked like a perfectly good leg, except for a swelling around the ankle, and the numbness was slowly passing away. She jabbed and pulled and massaged, and was able to stand up. But the swelling was increasing rapidly, and beginning to hurt. She walked a few steps and sharp pains shot upward into her hip.

The horse had gone; Becky didn't even know in which direction. She sank down on the ground, holding back the tears, gritting her teeth against the pain.

"Maybe you weren't cut out for romance, Becky," she told herself. "Maybe you can't take it. Maybe you shouldn't go chasing around the country after men—especially married men."

She caught a sob and choked it off with a determined laugh. "It would be lots easier for you just to stay at home and let them come to you, and always remember to ask them how the wife and kiddies are, before you get too much interested."

Talking to herself, jibing, crying, laughing—she finally fought off her hys-

teria and panic. She got to her feet and hobbled down the wooded slope toward a clearing. From there she could see a ranch. It was a long ways off, but she had to make it.

Not till she had dragged herself over several painful miles toward the distant clutter of buildings did she realize that it was Pomeroy's ranch. It was still the only thing in sight, and she knew she would be lucky to make it that far. But the thought of facing Mark's wife, of having her know who she was, of having to tell her that Mark was dead—this was enough to make her lie down on the ground and consider staying right there till somebody found her. If anybody ever did. And if they didn't, that would be all right.

"Becky!" she said. "You're a dope!"

Becky admitted it. "I know that. But what can I do about it?"

"You can get up on your feet and start walking! Of course it hurts to walk. It hurts to think about going down there to that house. But it's the only thing to do. So get started! And stop your darned sniveling!"

The last mile was torture, both physically and mentally. When she reached the ranch, she was having to fight not only for each step forward but for each rational thought.

"I don't have to tell her who I am . . . I don't have to tell her anything about Mark . . . I'll just say I fell off my horse . . ."

SHE got through the gate and across the porch to the door. Maybe Mark's wife wouldn't be here. Maybe—

She lifted her hand to knock. A few hours previously, she had stood at this door, asking for Mark. And she had been told that Mark was "gone," but that Mrs. Pomeroy was "around somewhere." That was the first she had heard about Mrs. Pomeroy, and she had

made some dazed inquiries and then gone away. She certainly had never intended to come back.

Suddenly the door opened and a woman faced her. Could this be Mark's wife—this fierce-eyed, hard-faced, middle-aged woman? Surely not!

"Yes?" said the woman.

"I—I fell off my horse—"

The woman stared at her. "Who are you?"

Becky gulped. "I—my name is Becky Crown—"

"Becky! You're Becky!" Her voice arose harshly, triumphantly. "You're the tramp that stole my husband!"

Betty shrank back. "I didn't! He didn't tell me he was married—"

"You knowed he was married! You didn't care. You was goin' to take him away from me, wasn't you?"

Her hysteria was disgusting, and it was also frightening. Becky assumed an air of lofty superiority, an air which fitted her very well, in spite of everything. "This is ridiculous, Mrs. Pomeroy—"

"Don't try to high-tone me, sister! I'm as good as you are—I'm a hell of a lot better than you are! I'm Mrs. Pomeroy! I ain't Jo-Jo any more. I'm Mrs. Pomeroy and always will be. They can't take that away from me!"

Becky had forgotten her injured leg till she turned to leave, and then she had to grab a porch post to keep standing.

Jo-Jo didn't seem to notice that. "You thought you was goin' to be Mrs. Pomeroy, didn't you?" she jibed. "You thought he was goin' to marry you! Well, he wouldn't. He couldn't. He'd of run off with you. He'd of left me. He sold the cattle. He was on his way—"

She stopped suddenly. "What in hell are you doin' here, anyhow?"

With all of the dignity she could

manage, Becky said, "I tried to explain to you that I fell from my horse and injured my leg."

"Oh!" A hideous smile twisted her mouth as she mimicked Becky's words. "You fell from your horse. You injured your leg. How terrible! Come in and let me fix your leg."

She opened the door wide. "You have such pretty legs! It would be too bad if anything happened to them. It takes pretty legs to get a man. You know that, don't you? I've got pretty legs, too. Mark wouldn't have married me if I hadn't. He wouldn't have looked at you, if you had only one leg—Come in! Come in! I'll fix you up!"

Becky was genuinely terrified now. She hadn't expected such hatred, such crudity. Not in Mark's wife. How could he have married a woman like this?

She turned to hobble down the steps. Jo-Jo caught her by the arm. "Oh, no, you don't, my pretty little husband-snatcher! You're comin' in the house with me. I'm goin' to fix you so you won't steal anybody else's man!"

BECKY was helpless in her hands, and was partly dragged into the house, across a white bearskin rug and shoved on a pillowy lounge.

Jo-Jo stood back with her hands on her hips. "I'm goin' to kill you," she said, and the idea seemed to please and quiet her. "Yes," she repeated, quite calmly now, "I'm goin' to kill you."

A little while ago Becky had thought she was ready to die, but now, with death looking at her from blazing greenish eyes, she changed her mind considerably. Her blood seemed to be curdling in her veins, and there were spasms of panic in her throat, which never became sounds, because her throat was too tight and dry to let them through.

Jo-Jo walked across the room to a large square piano, draped with a multi-colored Spanish shawl. She picked up a small pistol lying on the piano. Her face seemed whiter, her eyes a brighter green.

Becky began crawling over pillows to reach the end of the lounge. Maybe she could get behind it. Maybe she could run—

"Run if you want to," said Jo-Jo. "I'm a pretty good shot."

There was a calm certainty about her that was maddening. And now it was Becky who was getting hysterical. She poised, ready to leap over the end of the lounge. She realized what a ridiculous sight she must be! She wouldn't die that way! If she had to die it would be bravely and gracefully.

Becky untangled her trembling legs and assumed a graceful sitting posture—at least, she hoped it was graceful. The gaudy pillows gave her much needed support.

"Mrs. Pomeroy," she said carefully, "you have accused me unjustly. You can shoot me, if you will. I really feel sorry for you."

She thought it was a pretty good speech. It measured up well with death-bed speeches she had read, and she thought it a pity that posterity would never read this one.

"Oh, you feel sorry for me, do you?" screamed Jo-Jo. "Why, you little tramp!"

She levelled the revolver.

Becky found it impossible to maintain her graceful loftiness. She was seized again with a panicky and ungraceful desire to throw herself behind the lounge, which she did as the revolver went off.

There she crouched, listening to the rush of feet, knowing that she had saved herself only momentarily, expecting to see the woman appear above her with blazing gun.

Then she heard the door slam, heard more rushing feet, and the voice of a man.

"Jo-Jo!"

That voice was familiar. It went through her and filled her with a miraculous, frantic hope.

"Stay out of this, Jay Collins!" cried Jo-Jo.

It was Jay! He was here, in this room! He would save her!

"What's the matter with you, Jo-Jo?"

"I'm goin' to kill her! And I'll kill you, too, if you—"

Jo-Jo broke off with a sharp cry as the gun went off again. There was the sound of a struggle. Becky peered over the back of the lounge.

Jay was wrestling the gun from the woman's hands. He held her, while she kicked him and screamed curses. Gradually she became subdued and started to cry.

BECKY could hardly believe it—this woman shedding tears. But they were tears of fury, not remorse. "I'll kill you!" she sobbed. "I'll kill her!"

Jay shook her roughly. "Look here! You've got her wrong! She didn't shoot your man. I shot him."

Jo-Jo stared at him uncomprehendingly. "You—what?"

"I killed your man," Jay repeated stubbornly. "She didn't do it."

There was an amazement in her stare which finally gave way to a gleam of cunning. "You killed Mark?"

Jay had not expected her to act this way. He had thought she would fly at him in a fury. But she seemed almost pleased about it.

"Well, well!" she said. "So you killed Mark!" A wild gust of laughter swept her as she sank into a chair.

Becky cried, "No! He didn't!" She hardly realized what she was say-

ing. She knew only that she had to protect him, somehow. He had made the confession to save her. But there was no need of it!

Now Jo-Jo's queer, fixed stare was on her. "How do you know he didn't?"

Becky looked at Jay, and the frantic thudding of her heart became a racing hop-skip-and-jump. She knew, of course, that he had killed Mark to save her from disgrace. And now he had saved her from death. The least she could do was to try to protect him from the foolish confession.

"I know he didn't," she answered, "because I did it!"

"Don't pay no attention to her!" Jay shouted. "I tell you I killed him!"

Jo-Jo stared from one to the other, stretching tighter the faint, mocking smile on her whitened lips. "So you ganged up on him, both of you!"

"Mrs. Pomeroy!" Becky said firmly, "He is only trying to protect me. I killed your husband. I had every reason in the world to do it. He made love to me. He said he would marry me. I found out he was married. So I killed him."

It sounded so factual it almost frightened her. Suppose they believed her? Suppose they brought her to trial? Let them! She would stand a much better chance of being cleared than Jay.

"Look here, Jo-Jo!" Jay said roughly. "I told you a long time ago that Mark Pomeroy was a rat. I knowed he kept goin' to see Becky, after he married you. I—couldn't stand it any longer. I killed him."

Jo-Jo sat silently watching them, calm now, and although her eyes gleamed as fiercely as ever, there was a kind of gloating in them. Jay couldn't meet her eyes. She knew he was lying, didn't she? She hated Becky and would do everything in her

power to see that she was punished.

Becky stared at Jo-Jo intently, trying to read her thoughts, trying to fathom that mocking smile, that gloating triumph in her eyes. Jo-Jo knew she was lying, didn't she? But Jo-Jo hated her so much, she might pretend to believe it.

It made no difference, after all, what Jo-Jo believed. What the sheriff believed would count. They could no longer keep it a secret. There would be the scandal to face, and that would be the worst part of it all. No doubt that was what Jo-Jo was thinking of.

Jo-Jo got up and walked to the door. She stood looking off into the distance for a time, as if trying to decide what she should do.

"Anybody else know about this?" she asked.

"Everybody knows it by now, I reckon," Jay said. "Fritch and Cloughton saw him. They went and got the sheriff. He came after me. I got away from him. I had to see you—" He was talking to Becky now. He was talking to her mostly with his eyes, begging her to let him take the blame. And she was talking back the same way, begging him to let her take the blame.

"YOU just think you got away from him," said Jo-Jo.

Jay swung around, went quickly to the door. A group of riders was coming out of the arroyo west of the house, fanning out into a semi-circle. He recognized Sheriff Cain, Art Baxter, Tiny Fritch, and Soupy Cloughton. There were other teamsters in the crowd, but he couldn't see them all, for they were filtering between the out-buildings which surrounded the house.

Jay no longer cared what happened to him, so long as he could save Becky. Jo-Jo would not believe that he had killed Pomeroy, but the sheriff would

be glad to believe it. All Jay had to do was walk out and surrender to the sheriff, and repeat his confession.

He pushed past Jo-Jo.

"Jay!" cried Becky. "Where are you going?"

He didn't answer her. He started through the door, raising his hands as he did so, and realizing suddenly that even this gesture might not save him. They might start shooting the instant they saw him. They wanted only to kill him.

But he had to talk to the sheriff. He had to confess the killing of Mark Pomeroy. It was doubly ironic, confessing to a killing he had not committed, giving himself up to his enemies after all these months of battle. He had never dreamed that anything like this could happen.

He felt a pull at his gun, and twisted to face Jo-Jo. His hands were in the air. His gun was at his back. "What in hell—!" he muttered.

"Come back here!" said Jo-Jo.

"You gone crazy?"

"No, but you have. What was you goin' to do?"

Jay growled, "None of your damn business! Give me that gun!" He lowered his hand to take the gun, but the gleam in her eyes stopped him.

"I'll kill you, Jaybird," she said quietly.

He knew it, as well as he knew that he was standing there. "What are you tryin' to do?" he muttered.

"What are *you* tryin' to do?" she countered.

"I—just want to talk to the sheriff."

"You just want to tell him you killed Mark, don't you? So they won't get *her* for it!"

There was no need to deny or confirm it. She knew. She knew too damned much.

"Get back in the house!" she or-

dered. "I'm goin' out and talk to the sheriff, myself."

Before he could make a move to stop her, she was past him, darting across the porch into the yard. "Sheriff!" she yelled. "If he comes after me, shoot him!"

She ran across the yard to the blacksmith shop, behind which the sheriff had stopped.

The sheriff was surprised, watchful. "So he's in there, is he? Well, we'll get him."

He waved a signal to Art Baxter and Soupy Cloughton, who were behind the smoke house.

"He didn't kill Mark!" said Jo-Jo.

The sheriff tried to brush her aside, but nobody could brush Jo-Jo aside very easily. "I tell you he didn't do it!" Jo-Jo repeated. "That girl done it!"

"What girl?"

"Becky Crown."

THE sheriff snorted. "What makes you think that?"

"She said she did!"

"Huh? Then she lied."

"What would she lie for?"

"To try to save the Jaybird, I reckon."

"She don't care anything about him. She was in love with Mark. When she found out how he had tricked her, she killed him. It's all as plain as your nose, you old fool!"

He studied her. "You're mighty interested in this, ain't you?"

"Well, haven't I got a right to be? Wasn't it my man who was killed?"

"Yeah," the sheriff mused. "He was your man, and he was runnin' off with another woman."

Jo-Jo's glittering eyes were unwavering.

"If I start to ask questions about this thing, Jo-Jo," said the sheriff slowly, "I'll have to ask you some."

"Such as what?" she asked defiantly.

"Such as, where was you when Mark was shot?"

Jo-Jo's face was expressionless.

"If I thought the Jaybird didn't kill him," the sheriff went on, "and was tryin' to guess who did, I wouldn't guess Becky Crown. She ain't the kind of gal you'd expect to kill a man."

Color came back into Jo-Jo's face, the dull red color of fury. "You think she's an angel, don't you? Just because she's Dudley Crown's daughter. Just because she's so damned high-toned. You think she wouldn't kill a man who tricked her? You don't know your women, sheriff. Any woman would kill a dirty, double-crossin'—!" She stopped, and her face drained white again.

"Any woman, Jo-Jo?" the sheriff asked gently. "Let's see, now, what woman did Mark Pomeroy double-cross?"

Jo-Jo still held Jay's gun, and she clutched it tighter.

"Like I said, Jo-Jo," the sheriff went on, "if I start askin' questions, I'll have to ask you some. But I'm not askin' questions. I know who killed Mark Pomeroy."

Jo-Jo's voice was very low. "Who?"

"Jay Collins."

For a long time, Jo-Jo stared at him.

"You mean, you want it that way?"

The sheriff's smile hardened. "Don't you think he did?"

"You mean that you want to get the Jaybird. And here's something you can pin on him. You don't intend to give him a trial, do you, sheriff? You don't even intend to arrest him. You intend to kill him, right now. Ain't that right?"

Although the sheriff's smile was gone and his eyes were grim, there was still a certain brightness and cheerfulness about him. His big golden badge and his gold-handled guns gleamed bright-

ly. He was cheerful because he had his man trapped and knew he couldn't get away.

"You're pretty smart, Jo-Jo."

"I'm smart enough to see through you. If you can put the Jaybird out of the way, you think you can stop the railroad, don't you? You and Art Baxter will turn your mob loose on that pick-and-shovel gang and run 'em out of the country. The railroad won't be able to hire men to work on a job like that without protection. And you'll see to it that they don't get no protection, after the Jaybird's gone."

"You seemed to be interested in the railroad, too."

"I don't give a damn about the railroad, and you know it."

THE sheriff nodded. "You don't give a damn about anybody, now, do you, Jo-Jo? All you want is to get even with the girl that took your man away from you."

Jo-Jo screamed, "She done it, I tell you! She said so!"

"And she lied. I know who done it—just as well as you do." He smiled down at her. "I'm goin' after the Jaybird now."

Jo-Jo watched him as he drew a gun and motioned with it toward the restlessly waiting men who were scattered around the house, then started down the side of the blacksmith shop.

He knew who did it, and later he might tell. But right now he was going to get Jay, and not the girl. Jo-Jo pointed her gun at him. "Sheriff—!"

He paid no attention to her. She fired. As he fell he twisted to look at her in blank amazement. "Jo-Jo!"

She shot him again. He lurched sidewise, lifted his gun, and began shooting. Jo-Jo went down without a sound.

Art Baxter and Soupy Cloughton came running, darting around the tool

shed to keep it between them and the house.

"Get—the Jaybird!" yelled the sheriff.

They stopped, uncertainly.

"Go get him!" The sheriff crawled toward them on hands and knees.

"All right!" Baxter turned, waved his arms at three men who were crouching behind a watering tank. They sent his signal on to others, and it was passed around the house.

Inside the house, Jay waited. It seemed he had been waiting for hours, watching Jo-Jo and the sheriff, hearing their voices but not being able to determine what was said.

He saw the signals, now. He knew what to expect. Jay had the gun he had taken from Jo-Jo and tossed aside—a thirty-eight special. It was a woman's gun, a light, pearl-handled thing, and he wished fervently for his own forty-five.

Jo-Jo had used it to a good advantage. She had shot the sheriff with it. Jay could see him, now, crawling on his hands and knees, waving his gun. He could also see Jo-Jo. She lay in a motionless heap.

"Here's a big pistol!" Becky whispered.

He turned and took the forty-five from her hand. "Where'd you get that?"

"Back there," she motioned toward the hall. "Give me that little one!"

This was almost as hard for him to comprehend as the fact that he had seen Jo-Jo shot to death. It was all cockeyed. Women starting gun-fights, getting killed. Women *wanting* to fight, with guns.

He had never felt that he knew Becky very well. He had known Jo-Jo much better, and he was not surprised at her shooting, but he was shocked and sickened over seeing her shot. And, now, Becky wanted him to give her a gun.

She wanted to fight, too. She had killed one man. She wanted to shoot somebody else.

"You see what happened to *her*?" he asked.

There was a curious, entranced look about her. It reminded him of the way she used to act when Pomeroy came around. "She tried to stop them, and they killed her! She was wonderful!"

"Wonderful?" Jay choked. "Look here kid, you're loco. Just plain wild-eyed crazy!"

SHE nodded solemnly. "I really believe I am. For I'm not afraid. Really, I'm not. I'm going to stay here with you. And I'm going to shoot them if they come after you."

He said grimly, "They won't be as easy to shoot as Pomeroy."

She winced. "Was he—easy to shoot?"

He blurted, "You ought to know!"

Breaking the spell of her blank stare, he stammered, "Don't you? Didn't you?"

"Didn't I—what?"

"Didn't you shoot Pomeroy?"

She made an effort to answer, finally moving her head from side to side in a bewildered manner. "Me?" she gasped. "Me?"

It took no feat of memory on the part of Jay to remember when she was begging for a gun so she could shoot somebody. It had been about ten seconds ago. And now she seemed completely horrified over the idea.

"Didn't you—shoot him?" she cried.

Jay floundered, "Me?" With his head already in a whirl, Jay had a hard time surrounding this idea. "You didn't kill him?"

"No! Of course not! Didn't you?"

"No!"

They stared at each other in a silence that was broken by a shout from the outside: "Jaybird!"

He didn't answer. He couldn't be bothered just then. "But you *said* you done it!"

"Of course! I thought you did it!"

"Then why did you say you did?" he wanted to know.

"Why—just because I didn't want you to take all the blame."

He wanted to think about this. He wanted to get it straight; and it was very hard to think straight on such a proposition. But that voice from the outside blared at him again.

"We know you're in there, Jaybird! If you don't come out with your hands up, we're comin' after you!" It was Baxter.

Jay was silent, still thinking about Becky, and she must have thought he was considering a surrender. For she whispered, "Don't do it! They just want to kill you!"

Of course. They had been wanting to kill him for a long time. And there were enough of them out there to make it plenty hot. But that didn't bother him so much. What bothered him was: "What did you say you killed him for?"

"I just told you! I thought you had done it because you didn't want him to—go off with me, and if you were willing to do that for me, well—I thought I ought to do something for you."

He said slowly, "But since I didn't do it—"

"Who did?"

He shook his head. "I wished I had. Since you wanted me to."

"I didn't want you to!"

A window smashed near them, scattering broken glass on the floor in a tinkling accompaniment to the explosion of a sixgun. Jay wrapped his arm around Becky, drawing her close. "You've got to get out of this!"

It would have been hard for her to get out just then, the way he was holding her. "Give me—that gun!" she chattered.

"Thought you wasn't scared."

"I am now! They're coming after you."

It was good to remember they were not coming after her. They only wanted him. By staying in the house with her, he was putting her in danger.

He released her. "No they're not. I'm goin' after them!"

DOWN a short hallway, he saw a side door which opened on the west side of the house. All of the doors would be guarded, but a honeysuckle vine grew over this one and extended along a latticework to form a shield from the hot sun. It wouldn't shield him against hot lead, but it would help to obscure his movements.

He darted through the door and jumped off the little porch before they saw him. A yell went up and then came a blast of gunfire. Bullets ripped through the honeysuckle vine above his head. Bending low, he ran along the side of the house toward the back, where a cellar door stood open.

As he approached it, a figure appeared in the darkened doorway. Jay shot as a yellow burst of fire from a gun lighted the weapon in the hands of the half-hidden man in the cellar. He couldn't see the result of this shot, but he heard a frantic thumping which sounded like a body rolling down the cellar steps.

Just then he caught a glimpse of Tiny Fritch, who appeared around the corner of the house, stopped quickly, and darted back. Jay threw a slug at him, and flattened himself against the house to wait Tiny's reappearance. Tiny didn't reappear in the very short time which Jay could afford to wait.

In all probability, the little gunman was waiting for Jay to show his head. Jay approached quietly, but instead of sticking his head around the corner of the house, he took a jump which car-

ried him far past it, out in the open, where he had a good view of everything on that side.

There was Tiny crouched against the wall, with his gun aiming at the place he expected Jay to appear. And just behind him was Soupy Cloughton. It was impossible for Soupy to flatten himself against the house, but he was trying his best. He had his forty-five pointed over Tiny's head.

Tiny was quick. He was shooting long before Soupy got into action, but shooting at Jay was like shooting a bird on the wing. Jay was going around that corner fast, and he didn't stop. He poured lead into them as he ran toward them. Tiny withered. As he went down he let out a yell which pierced the mechanical thunder of the guns with the first human sound to come out of the fight.

It brought terror and agony into the fight, and it swept over Soupy. He tried to run, but it wasn't much of a race. Jay had up full speed already. But he had emptied both the forty-five and the thirty-eight. He had .45-caliber cartridges in his gun belt. He knew he could catch Soupy and he knew he could beat him down with an empty gun, but there would be others beside Soupy. There would be Baxter and the rest of his crowd, and he couldn't deal with them with an empty gun.

So he snatched fresh cartridges from his belt and began jamming them into his gun. Soupy, seeing this, realized his advantage. He didn't stop running, but he did throw some slugs. He did it desperately, as if he didn't have much faith in this last effort. Jay plunged after him, filling the cylinder of his gun.

As he did so, he saw Baxter standing behind him at the corner of the house with gun raised. Jay was squarely between Soupy and Baxter. He had his gun on Soupy, and didn't even have

the opportunity of choosing his man in this three-cornered game of going-to-hell.

HE TRIED to get away from Baxter's blast by throwing himself toward the house, and toward a bulging bay window, but that was like trying to outrun a bullet. Baxter was not a notoriously good shot, but he didn't have to be when he had the corner of the house to rest his gun against, and his target was only twenty feet away.

Jay sent that one slug at Soupy because it was already started, and he had the satisfaction of seeing it hit. At the same time he heard the gun behind him and so sure had he been that Baxter couldn't miss, he could feel the bullet crashing into his back. It seemed to whirl him around, but that was only because he was whirling himself for a shot at Baxter as he fired on Soupy. He hadn't been hit. It seemed miraculous, until he saw Becky.

She was on the back porch, swinging a mop stick. She had knocked the gun from Baxter's hand and now she was winding up for another whack at him, as he stooped to pick up his gun.

"Let him have it!" Jay yelled.

She did, but not the gun. She let him have another crack with the mop stick. He lost his balance and toppled off the porch, brushing the gun to the ground as he fell. Jay waited for him to pick it up, hardly hoping that he would. In his right mind, Baxter would not have touched it. But he had been hit over the head with a mop stick twice, and he was just crazy enough to pick up that gun.

And Jay was just crazy enough to let him shoot it—once. Jay had to be careful when he shot, because Becky was so close to Baxter. So he took especially good aim. He shot the man once in the chest and once in the face, cutting him down like the stump of a very

big tree, and he fell with a lifeless thud.

And now with Baxter and Tiny and Soupy out of it, Jay hoped the fight was over. He had no heart for fighting with these others, who had been led into the fight. Apparently, they had no heart for further fighting, either.

They scattered in different directions, and Jay stood and watched them. How long would it be before they would be after him again? Not long, perhaps. Just as soon as they could get together again, under the leadership of the wounded sheriff. It would depend a good deal on how bad he was hurt.

"Is it—all over?" Becky asked. She was still ready with her mop stick, just in case it wasn't.

Jay looked at her with new admiration. He had never seen anybody who looked less likely to wade into a free-for-all fight—and he was an expert in free-for-all fights.

"No," he said, "it ain't all over. It's just startin'."

"Oh!"

He stepped up to the edge of the porch, on which she was standing. This put her about three feet above him and he had to look up to her. He didn't like this. He reached up and pulled her down into his arms. She didn't put up any fight. And she could have. She had the mop stick.

"It's just startin'," he repeated, "between you and me."

"But I don't want to fight," she said.

He grinned. "Neither do I!"

For a long time he held her in his arms and looked at her. It seemed to be the first time he had really seen her. She had large, soft lips. She had large soft eyes. She looked like a doll.

"Say 'papa'," he said.

"What for?"

"I just want to hear you say it."

SHE said, dutifully, "Papa!"

He kissed her, and she wrapped

her arms around his neck. "Oh! Jay, darling! Why didn't I fall in love with you—the first time?"

Within plain sight were three dead men. But what was so horrible about that? Not that they were dead. Death was nothing to be afraid of—in this world or the next. They were in love. They had acknowledged it. And it was impossible to be afraid.

"I reckon we better see about the sheriff," Jay said.

"The sheriff? Oh! I'd forgotten all about him. And Mrs. Pomeroy!"

They went quietly through the house, Becky limping on her swollen ankle, but leaning on him for support. "Did you know her very well?" she asked.

"Yeah."

He ignored the look she gave him—a kind of telescopic inspection, and it was just as well. She would never understand his friendship for Jo-Jo, and he would never understand or probably be able to allay her suspicions.

"Look!" Becky pointed through the front door. "She's moving! She's not dead!"

Jo-Jo wasn't dead, but the sheriff was. The sheriff had crawled nearly to the house and lay on his face, still gripping his gun.

Jay carried Jo-Jo into the house and put her on the lounge in the living room. Becky arranged the gaudy pillows under her.

"You can't—do nothin'—for me now," she told them. "I couldn't die till—I told you. Maybe you know, anyway—I killed Mark—he wanted me to divorce him—he wanted to marry you—I wouldn't give him up—he said he was goin' to you, anyway—he sold the cattle—he was goin' to you when I shot him—"

Her breath was gone, but she wanted to talk some more, so she went on, whispering. "I'm glad I shot him—I'm glad I didn't shoot you—" Her eyes,

still bright and gleaming, still green and knowing, moved from one to the other—"You're in love, ain't you? I was in love, too. Twice. It's worth it—even if you have to shoot 'em—" A smile twisted her lips, and they didn't move again.

Becky clung to Jay, her eyes running with tears. "She's—wonderful!"

It seemed to Jay that this was quite a tribute to the woman that hated and would have killed her, if he hadn't got there just in time. It showed him something else about Becky which he not only could admire, but which would make her a better woman to live with. She had a spirit of forgiveness.

HE KNEW that she would have to forgive him a lot. He knew he would get into a lot of fights. He knew that he would get bored with the railroad job, now that the fighting was over, and he would be dragging Becky all over the country—to mining camps, to cattle towns, to all the places where there would be excitement, and fun, and fighting. Would she like that?

Or would she expect him to take a soft job with his rich father-in-law?

"I forgot to ask you, honey, how'd you like to be a mule-skinner's wife?"

"I'd love it!"

He wasn't sure she understood. "I mean—just as soon as I can get me another outfit, we'll probably be travelin' around. It won't be easy, on what a mule-skinner makes."

She understood. "I'll go with you, anywhere. I don't care how much money you make. Just so you make love to me—always."

He reckoned that wouldn't be very hard to do. And he gave her another demonstration.

"That's fine!" she said. "You must have had a lot of practice."

"Oh, no," he said. "Makin' love just comes natural to a mule-skinner."

Boothill Sends A Badman

By DAVID X. MANNERS

Death waited beyond every draw, when a man rode with Owen Catclaw's X060 crew, powdersmoke must be the pay-off!



Guns barked in quick, determined anger

JIM FRANK'S eyes warily scanned the alder thickets. He rode carefully by uptilted rocks, and his hand hovered near his holster gun. He slowed at turns in the trail, stiff in his saddle.

The last two nights, Jim had seen strange riders near neighbor Owen Catclaw's X060 ranch. He'd seen them again, just now as he'd left his own

ranch. Holsters rigged for fast draws, they had swept ahead, off in the distance toward town.

Jim reined suddenly from the trail. He was sure neighbor Catclaw was riding with that group of gunmen. Catclaw was aware Jim was going to town to file his bid on the Government beef contracts. Catclaw wanted those contracts himself, and Catclaw, Jim was

beginning to suspect, would like nothing better than to see him six feet under.

Jim turned down toward the river. This shortcut was the best way to avoid a possible ambush along the trail. The twenty-foot cutbanks, softened by spring thaws, crumbled treacherously underfoot.

The river was still a solid sheet of ice, but glistened wet with the warm sun. Any day now, the cannon up at the Fort would fire, signalling the breakup of the ice. With it would come the spring freshet—a roaring avalanche of water and ice that yearly came tearing down the valley. Already, the freshet was later than it had been in ten years. Jim picked his way carefully across the cracking ice.

Neck-branded X060 horses were switching their tails, stomping at the hitchrail in front of the Government Agent's office in town when Jim rode in. Jim recognized Catclaw's private mount among them.

Jim went inside the office. He looked at Owen Catclaw, a man who had once been his partner, and his heart stirred uneasily, restively. The story of their split was one everyone on the Wildgrass knew . . . The split had been inevitable when they both fell in love with the same girl—dimpled Jeanie Atkins, and Catclaw had won her. Then thin-nosed Ab Yokum, their foreman, had disappeared—and six thousand dollars of the ranch's money along with him.

Owen Catclaw accused Jim of taking that money, of murdering the foreman as a cover-up. But Catclaw had to swallow his words. For not long after, the supposedly murdered foreman, Ab Yokum, apparently conscience-stricken, began sending the money back!

Jim Frank looked at Catclaw's sullen eyes. "Howdy, Owen," Jim said now.

"Long time no see."

Gibbs, the Government Agent, looked up worriedly from his desk. Dix and Larkin, two of Catclaw's men, regarded Jim uncertainly, awaiting a cue from their boss. Owen Catclaw muttered a greeting. He was tall, wiry—handsome. But his face had a hungry look. Jim reached into the inside pocket of his coat. He brought out a long, sealed envelope, handed it to Gibbs.

"My beef bid," he said. From a wallet he fingered a draft. "An' here's my check for fifteen hundred, the guarantee."

Jim saw Catclaw's face harden. He was sorry he had to flaunt the money before him. Catclaw had suffered big losses this past winter. His cattle die-off had been heavy. He was close to bankruptcy.

Gibbs said to Jim, "You know you still got forty-eight hours after filing your bid to post your forfeit."

Catclaw cut in, "Let him post it early," he snorted. "That's the one satisfaction he's going to get out of this deal." Brooding hate was in his dark brown eyes.

Jim signed over the check to the Agent, folded the receipt given him, and walked to the door. All through these years—ten, wasn't it now—he'd been trying to make peace with Owen Catclaw. He stopped, turned, his hand on the latch.

"Owen," he said. "If you have trouble scaring up the cash to back yore beef bid, I can let you have it." He saw Catclaw's pride bristle, and he hurried to explain. "I want you to have a fair shake on these Government contracts, is all. I know we've had an ornery winter. You've had yore troubles."

Catclaw took two steps, slowly, stiffly. His hands lashed out suddenly, caught Jim's collar.

Gibbs leaped up from his desk. Cat-

claw's two men tensed. But Catclaw thrust Jim away, as though he'd changed his mind about using violence.

"Blast you and yore talk!" he snorted. "Yuh know yuh never think of anything but yore own mangy hide!"

"That's right!" Jim whipped back. He remembered the gun-hung riders. "I *am* thinking of my own hide! It's wuth fifteen hundred dollars to me to have a friend instead of an enemy. Nothin' does a gent good iffen he's six feet underground!"

"Meanin' what?" Catclaw snarled.

Jim Frank held himself in check. "Meanin' I hate to see you crackin' up, Owen. You used to be a good gent. That's all!"

He turned again toward the door.

Catclaw said, "You'll never git that beef contract, Frank. Mark my words! You'll never deliver a solitary head to the Fort! I mean that!"

Jim did not answer. He stepped outside. Behind him he could hear Catclaw in the office.

"C'mon, men," Catclaw said. "Le's git outen here. No, wait till Frank grabs his animal. I don't want even to be seen on the street with that skunk!"

Jim Frank took his horse. Three mud-splattered riders, wearing law-badges, were quitting the rail at the Shamrock saloon when he stopped at the trough there to water his mount. From there, Jim headed homeward.

He left the trail beyond town, rode the line of his range. He looked at his herds, fat, healthy in spite of the winter. Corral-fed stock. He spotted several groups of his cowboys. But he wasn't paying fighting wages. If ther'd be trouble, he'd find himself shorthanded.

HE SHIFTED his men, spread them out thinly along the entire line of his fence.

He returned home finally, stabled his horse behind his house. Inside, Frank

stopped, for he saw mud in drying streaks on the hall's wide puncheon. A navy carpet was marked with granular clumps of dirt.

Jim stared at his office's closed door. Carefully, his hand went to the .44 at his hip. He shoved open the door suddenly, eyes sharp.

The room was empty. But someone had drawn the room's shades!

A floorboard creaked. Jim saw the slight movement of a closet doorhandle. He brought out his gun, levelled it. "All right!" he commanded. "Come easy!"

The closet knob twisted, and the door swung open. Then, disturbedly, Jim reholstered his gun.

"Phil," he railed, "what kind of a crazy game is this?"

A young man stepped from the closet. Phil Catclaw was like Owen Catclaw, his father. Tall, stiff, as unbending as a cedar post. But with it all there was a recklessness in his makeup. For he was Jeanie's son too, and that thought was a pang to Jim.

The youngster rubbed the palms of his hands dry on mud-flecked and snag-ripped pants. He blinked burning eyes that were haggard and sleepless. He tossed back his disordered shock of black hair.

Jim Frank crossed to close the door of the office. Phil apparently mistook the gesture.

"Don't give me away!" he pleaded. Then he seemed to realize Jim didn't understand. "I'm in trouble! Deep, awful trouble!"

Jim turned back from the door, tensed.

Young Phil Catclaw had never found sympathy or understanding in his father. Though loyal in their devotion to one another, they were both too headstrong to get along together. But Phil had been won and held by Jim Frank's friendship. Owen Catclaw's objections to that friendship only served to

strengthen it.

"I didn't know what I was doing," Phil moaned. "Dad was desperate for money. I must have been loco!" His chest flattened with his expired breath. "What will I do? I helped rob the Tul-kee bank!"

Thoughts tumbled quickly through Jim's brain. He thought of the three lawmen he's seen in town. "Wait a minute! Hold up! You don't know what yo're talkin' about, kid! You didn't rob no bank!" Jim's words were a prayer—what he wanted to believe.

"Oh, if I only hadn't!" Phil sobbed. "It was Bart Ramola and his killer-bunch talked me into it . . . I met up with them in town, and then they took to hanging out around Dad's ranch. Said I knew the country around here." He shook his head in wild terror. "But that ain't the craziest part yet!"

He crossed the room, swung about, his blue eyes wide with misery. He pointed. "There!" he exclaimed. "In that bag! Under yore desk! Eight thousand dollars worth. I got scared of the whole mess. So when I got a lucky chance, I grabbed the whole damn thing myself—and ran! As if I could give the money back and get out of the mess. Now Bart and his killers will gun me down on sight—if the law doesn't do it fust!"

THE youngster sank into a chair, buried his head in his trembling hands. Jim looked at him. Then at the desk, and under it. So it was Bart Ramola's bunch that he'd seen skulking near the X060. And Phil, scared of what he'd done, had tried to save things by running off with the loot.

Jim glanced at the room's drawn shades. Then he bent quickly and dragged the bag out from under the desk. He put it on the desk-top, slid back the bag's brass catches. Bundled green-backs, sacked coins, popped from

the hinged-open mouth of the bag.

Jim turned back to Phil. He couldn't help but remember the time Owen Catclaw had been robbed—and he himself had been charged with that robbery—a charge Catclaw had not yet forgotten.

The snap of the bag's clasps was loud. "A damfool stunt you've done!" Jim said. He swung the closed bag from the table.

"What yuh goin' to do?" young Phil begged. "You're not going to Dad?"

Jim shook his head, walked to the door. He turned, his hand on the latch. He wondered if he were doing this in memory of his dead friendship with Owen Catclaw. Or was he thinking of Jeanie—and Jeanie's boy?

"You better lie on the sofa a while, kid," he said. "Get some rest. I got a little shack across the river, but you'll prob'ly be as safe here as there right now."

Phil's blue eyes stared. "But I can't stay here. Dad will know somethin's wrong iffen I don't show up home. I've gotta go."

"An' have Bart Ramola butcher you if he finds you without the money? You stay here. I'm taking this money back to the bank. Bart will quit the country when he finds the money's back there. He won't risk capture just to get vengeance on you."

That argument finally satisfied Phil, and Jim went out when he saw that it had.

In the barn, Jim resaddled his mount. He slung saddlebags across his pommel, stuffed the money-grip into one of the bags. He wondered if what he'd just said to Phil about Bart Ramola were true.

Jim rode into Wildgrass. As he rode slowly down the street he saw Will Ambers, Wildgrass' lawman. Jim was doubly conscious of the presence of the saddlebags now. Of the clink of coins in the bag at his knee.

Jim rolled spurs as he passed the end of Wildgrass' street. It was funny, he thought, that he should be risking this for Owen Catclaw's son. Owen Catclaw, a man who every day drank a toast to his death.

Night was sifting down, softening the sharp outlines of the encircling Salt-grass ridges. It was dark when Jim approached Tulkee, saw its light-speckled glow in the shrouded distance.

Jim Frank rode slowly up Tulkee's street. The dark shadow of the bank loomed ahead. The rising moon caught only one side of the building in light.

Jim nosed up to a deserted hitchrail, drew his reins through a tie-ring. A hundred yards back, two men walked along the boardwalk; the rest of the town seemed empty. Jim opened the buckle of the saddlebag, drew out the clasp-bag.

He approached the bank's shadowed porch, the bag in his hand. There was a mail slot in the front door. In a very few minutes, working fast, he could shove the currency through, dump the sacked coin inside the door.

A FIGURE appeared from the side of the bank. Moonlight glinted on a shotgun barrel held across a crooked arm. The barrel arced upward. Then it eased down again.

'Howdy, Mister Frank.'

Jim Frank spoke above the drumming of his heart. "Howdy, Johnston. Got you on guard-duty tonight?"

He realized Johnston had been one of the possemen he'd seen earlier in the day.

The posseman nodded, tossed his head back toward the bank. "A little like lockin' the stable after the horse is gone, I know, but we figgered they might be comin' back fer another help-in'. Pete Reibel's out back. I'm in front."

Jim Frank moved on up the walk,

wondering if the guard had noticed the bag with suspicion. The bag was a deadly, leaden weight in his grasp. He paused briefly at the far end of the street, then circled back wide to get his horse.

He rode back through Wildgrass, on to his own range. He was a fool! This thing could be settled so simply. Tomorrow, he would take the bank money directly in to Will Ambers, simply tell the Wildgrass sheriff he'd found the bag along the river's edge.

Jim cut wide, followed the river onto Catclaw's range. A warm night breeze sprang up. The river sighed. The occasional sharp cracking of its ice was loud. That ice would be unsafe crossing now for a horse and rider. Jim looked off to the summit of a dark hill beyond. Lights were an indistinct yellow blur in Catclaw's house.

Jim turned back to his own house. He stopped at its office door. He could make out the vague outlines of young Phil Catclaw sleeping there. There was an uneven cadence to Phil's breathing. He stirred.

Jim went up to his own room and sat in the dark. He rested his arm on the edge of his dresser and leaned his head into the palm of his hand, covering his eyes, while worried thoughts tumbled through his brain. He heard the ticking of his watch in the pocket of his vest and he thought of the picture in the inside back of that watch. Phil's mother. Dimpled Jeanie.

In the morning, Phil Catclaw was troubled, nervous when Jim explained what had happened. "I got to get home," he said. "Dad's gonna start lookin' fer me."

"Wait a while," Jim cautioned, his lined face tense. "Wait till I get this money back like I tell yuh. Leave it to me. You don't want to cross Bart Ramola. Lay low until we kin get Bart to quit this country."

Jim wondered if the kid believed that. He didn't know what would really happen. What would happen when Bart got a line on the kid's whereabouts?

ONCE again Jim rode into town, headed for the sheriff's office, the money in his saddlebag. Gibbs, the Government Agent, waved to Jim as he passed. Jim stopped.

"I'd look out for Owen Catclaw," Gibbs whispered. "You heard what he's up to?"

"Has Catclaw posted his guarantee on his beef bid yet?"

"No. That's just it. He's spreadin' word that you were in on the robbery of the Tulkee bank. It's all over town. That the bank's where you got the coin to post your own guarantee. That you offered to buy him off by putting up his forfeit for him!"

Jim's eyes went bleak. He looked over toward the sheriff's office, and his jaw clamped tight. Wordlessly he heeled his mount ahead. Men were watching him from the boardwalk.

Swanson, a rutabaga farmer from down the county, called, "Vy you take all dat sass, Mister Frank? Vy you don't punch dat Catclaw feller?"

"We oughta run that lyin' Catclaw outa town," someone else pitched in.

Jim Frank's lips grew tight. He felt the weight of the saddlebag at his knee and his heart sank. He couldn't possibly return the money now. Owen Catclaw, with his fool talk, was putting a ring of death about his own son!

Jim left the town behind. He rode back along his line fence. Two of his punchers trotted up. Tex Watrous, one of them, offered, "Le's go take that Catclaw fool's taw. You heard the muck he's been spreadin'?"

Jim raised his hand in a placating gesture.

"Why you always stickin' up for that weasel?" the puncher flared. "If it's

dog eat dog, I'll be damned if I'd let him rip my throat!"

Jim said nothing, reined his horse away. He rode on to his house. Approaching, he saw half a dozen strange riders grouped in his ranchyard. He reined, in quick caution, behind an alder clump.

A voice, pitched low, called to him from the thick growth right beside him.

Phil Catclaw poked out of the dense growth. "Dad was just by here," he whispered, his face deathly pale. "I sneaked out of the house, hid here till he was gone. Then, just as I was stickin' my nose out, Ramola's bunch hazed up! That's them now! *They're looking for me!*"

Jim cast a glance toward the house, then back at the youngster. "Not a chance in a million breaking from here." His voice was jagged, broken. "You—best lay low. I'll—"

The whine of a bullet interrupted. Broken bits of bark and wood floated down from above Jim, where the slug clipped branches. Jim leaned from his saddle. A quick burst of Winchester-fire blazed from Ramola's bunch. They started their horses moving fast toward Jim and Phil.

"Put a foot up here, quick!" Jim kicked loose a stirrup, reined his mount down tight toward Phil. "Get up, kid! Get up!"

Jim turned tail, as the youngster swung up behind him in the saddle. Lead streamed at him from Ramola's pursuing riders. Jim angled, let go a quick, rhythmic blast with his own gun. He pounded toward the river, at the spot he'd crossed it the day before. A notch in the high cutbanks. Then he stopped in sudden realization.

"A horse and rider can't make it across the ice," he said, urgently. "Let alone a horse packing double."

Young Phil stared at him.

Jim thought: *It's funny I should be*

here with Owen Catclaw's son. It's funny I should be doing this for the son of a man who'd like to see me toes-up!

"You get across," Jim Frank said. "I'll hold these wolves off while you do."

YOUNG Phil shook his head. "You can't fight six killers alone!"

Jim glared at him. "You won't help me by staying. You'll only make it worse."

Riders showed above the hill crest. Jim dismounted, turned behind a smooth upthrust of rock. He triggered quickly. Ramola's riders stopped, spread. One man here in the notch, Jim knew, could stop any number of riders from breaking through. The notch was the only access to the steep-banked river.

Sudden, sharp thunder rolled up the river. Jim glanced above him. The bare branches of the brush shook with the earth's vibration. Sound bounced and rebounded, faded into a distant roll.

Phil said, "The cannon at the Fort!" He looked down at the river, as though to check the signal that heralded the break-up of the ice.

"You better get across fast!" Jim breathed. The river ice was like a dam. When it broke, all the spring floodwaters, held back till now, would burst in one tidal wave.

"I'll go. But I'll bring back help!"

Phil slipped down the cutbank slope then, shielded from bullets by the sharp drop-off. He began running on the river ice. Jim saw the horsemen array themselves on the slope above him. He fortified himself up behind a rock. His bullets sprayed the slope.

He heard a sharp shout as the riders saw Phil. They loosed a leaden hail at Jim's rock. Wildly the men spurred down the gulley.

Jim aimed slowly, deliberately. A

center-shot picked one rider out of the saddle. Another spilled a horse and rider. The other outlaws were deflected to one side, into brushy growth.

Guns barked in quick, determined anger. A bullet gouged sharply against Jim's scalp, tore away his hat. He lifted his fingers, felt hot, wet blood. In seconds, blood was flowing into his eyes, blurring his vision. A swirling dizziness shook him.

The guns stopped suddenly. Jim roused. He guessed he'd fainted momentarily. Distantly, hoofbeats raised on the air. Two remaining outlaws angled into the open. Hanging, Indian fashion behind their mounts' necks, they whipped down the ravine.

Jim glanced at the river. Phil was just closing the last yards toward the far shore. Jim triggered to stop the last two outlaws. His gun jammed. The riders thundered past him, shooting at Jim as they went by.

Then Jim saw them dancing their horses at the river's edge, hesitating, debating. The flood was still a mile or more off. He rose up from the rock, stumbled toward them. They couldn't use horses on that ice. One rider started out. The other waited a moment, then followed, out over the ice—toward where Phil Catlaw had gone.

Jim looked back toward his own horse, then down at his useless gun. He holstered the gun, moved to catch up his horse.

Now the first rider on the ice had stopped, twenty-five yards out from shore. He shouted, pointed upstream at the advancing ice. He swung his horse about, headed back. In turning, the horse's forelegs came down hard on the ice, broke through.

The crash and tear of the flood upstream deepened to an earth-shaking rumble.

Water and ice—leaping, ripping—tore at the cutbank gorge.

THE second rider tried to roundside the first in his attempt to escape the descending torrent. Then his horse broke through, too. He leaped from his saddle to the ice. The cracked ice gave away.

The tremor of the earth grew to a quaking throb. Jim saw the dancing spray of the flood above the height of the cutbank. With dull, pounding smashes, ice filled the gorge from brim to brim—the greatest volume in ten years—the accumulation of the hardest winter in all that time. Huge chunks of ice piled end over end. Like a giant wave, they crumbled, broke, swept over the two outlaws and their horses.

Then the crest of the river ice was past at this point. Already it rushed with destructive fury toward the valley below.

Jim sagged limply, eased to the ground. The earth still shook under him. The thin, shivering movement died away. Jim settled back against a rock. His lips curled into a smile, a contended restful smile. Phil Catclaw was safe. The set-up was made to order now. The money could be returned to the bank. The dead outlaws could be used as proof of how he'd come into possession of it. . . .

Jim tried to rest; but he sank into a stupor from loss of blood. Hoofbeats clattered a soft rhythm beyond him, and he roused. He was not sure how long he had been out, but some of his strength had returned. He turned to the rider, and the smile on his lips faded. It was Owen Catclaw. Jim thought: *This is Catclaw's chance to kill me with no one the wiser. They'd think I stopped a bullet in the gunfight.*

Catclaw's thin face was tight. He stared at Jim Frank. "You had a gun-ruckus here?" he asked.

"Yeah," Jim said. "The bunch that knocked over the Tulkee bank. Six of them. The two I didn't get, the flood

did."

A smile came to Owen Catclaw's mouth. A bitter, nervous smile. The muscles in his face twitched. "I was up the river, looking for my boy. He wasn't home last night. I heard the fight back here." He dropped his eyes. "Jim—" His voice stumbled, broke.

Jim looked where Catclaw had dropped his eyes. He saw it then for the first time. Mud and dirt covered an object that Catclaw held in his lap, as he sat in the saddle of his horse. It was an oblong box a foot long and about half that square.

Catclaw's face turned paler. He caught Jim's eyes. "You know what that box is, Jim? You recognize it?" His voice rose high, shrill. "I reckon water washes away a heap o' sins. I hope it will mine. All these years I been thinkin', Jim, you stole that ranch money. Damn it, Jim, I don't know what to say. That big freshet played merry damnation with the river banks. *It mucked out a skeleton that'd been caved in 'em for ten years!*"

Owen Catclaw's thin, bloodless lips quivered. "Ab Yokum, I reckon, got caught in a cavein on them soft cut-banks when he was runnin' away. He was still clutchin' this box. I saw the initialed brads on his gunbelt. Go ahead. Smash me, Jim. I held you lower'n a snake all these years—all these years when you was repayin' the bad I was doin' yuh with good. I hate a thief, Jim. A sneakthief worst of all, and God help me, that's what I thought you was. A man who'd backstab a partner and slime off with his shirt. I knowed it was you sending back that money. Why'd you do it, Jim? Why'd you send back money that you never even stole?"

THE gurgling flow of the river was soft on the air. Water trickled down from mudpuddles formed by the

flood. Jim's thoughts went back over the years. He thought of his old partnership with Owen, how they'd both fallen in love with Jeanie, and Owen had won her. Then had come the robbery, and Ab Yokum's disappearance, with Owen blaming it all on Jim. The mysterious returning of the money . . . apparently by the conscience-stricken Yokum.

"I'll tell you why I sent it," Jim said suddenly. "I sent back that money because I really did steal it! Ab Yokum and me. We was going to run off with it together!"

Jim straightened, and his eyes lost their sadness. "I hated yore guts, Catclaw, when you married Jeanie. I figgered to break you. It makes no difference that Ab Yokum crossed me at the last minute, run off with that money-box himself."

Catclaw stepped his horse forward. "What you're sayin' ain't true," he protested. "You're lyin'!"

"It's plenty true. An' I see now just how much of a fool I been. Givin' back the money, bein' sorry about it—that didn't mean a damn thing. I should have come right out and tol' you I'd stole it. I should have tol' everybody else the same. I had medicine comin' to me—I shoulda took it."

Owen Catclaw stared. "Then I *was* right!" he gasped, at last. "You did steal it."

Jim climbed his horse, reined it about. "Maybe it's not too late to confess the real story of what happened. What a relief it'll be gettin' it off my chest!"

He kicked up his horse, reined it away. He cut wide across the range. The river was free of ice, a shallow, sluggish stream. He forded it. Distantly, he saw a group of riders pounding swiftly to the scene of his gun-battle. That would be Phil Catclaw, bringing help he'd promised to bring

and that was no longer needed.

Jim rode up Wildgrass' street. He tied his horse at the rail before the Shamrock. Something poked hard and round into his ribs.

Owen Catclaw's voice said in his ear, "If you want to die, try to go in there. Try to tell anyone what happened."

Jim turned. He looked down, saw Owen Catclaw's fisted hand, the thumb stiff so that it had stabbed into his back.

"You got your choice, Jim," Owen Catclaw said, a tight grin on his lips as he carried on with his joke. "Try to go in there, and I'll plant a bullet in you. Or—" And he opened the fist to an open, extended palm.

Jim was silent.

"Don't le's be fools any longer," Catclaw said. "You saved my boy's life today. I saw him. I know all about what you did. That pays off any old score, Jim. Anyway, any man who'd pay back money out of his own pocket, to make good on what somebody else run off with—"

CATCLAW extended his hand.

"No," Jim said, ignoring Catclaw's hand. "I didn't pay it out of my own pocket. It was me who 'crossed Ab Yokum, when I figgered he was about to run off. I paid back what I took, but I never made it good out of my own pocket. That money-box you got there—it's only got the cut-up newspaper and sacks of iron washers I put in it. You still want to shake hands?"

Men walking down the boardwalks of Wildgrass' street stared and stared again, and scratched their heads. They would not believe what they saw.

Owen Catclaw and Jim Frank were pumping each other's arms, and they both looked like they were—enjoying it!

Freedom Means Blood and Bullets

By GEORGE JENSEN

So now the kid was the Colt-famous Thorn, so now he was notoriously the fastest man with a gun in the West. So now he could be damned proud of himself as he rode onto eternal range, couldn't he? . . .



"You won't beat me to the draw this time," Thorn said

THERE were several men in the town who knew how to use a gun. There were three in particular.

There was old Bill Marion, who fanned two of them: he could do it left-hand or righthand.

There was Harry Sedgwick, who had a wife and two grown sons now and a decent-sized place, but who once was known well up and down the dim

trails.

There was the Hilary kid, Eddie Hilary, whose experience was mostly with tincans and old coins and pebbles, but who, the old-timers said, was a natural-born wizard with a six-gun.

The Thorn knew about all of them, rest assured. The Thorn didn't move into a town without knowing in advance all the gun-skill the town boasted.

The Thorn had moved into Boulder just a week ago this evening. He'd ridden in at sunset. Somebody had recognized him, and the word had gone like wildfire through the town, and they were tense along the main street even as Thorn rode in.

Legend had it a pretty foolish way: legend had it that the Thorn had once been married to a very beautiful girl whose name was Rose; that she had left him early in their marriage because he had promised to give up the gun as a means of earning a living and had promised to go into cattle raising, but had never kept his promise; that brimstone wags and brimstone wanted dodgers had fastened the brand of "Thorn" on him thereafter.

FACT supposedly had it much more sensibly: fact had it that the man's name was simply Thorn, and as his reputation spread up and down the cattle trails, men had simply begun calling him "The Thorn." . . .

And now the trouble, the inevitable trouble, had come. Folks had of course known it would go this way: the sheriff didn't have the guts or the gun-speed to face Thorn with the fact of his Colt-rep and demand that he leave the town without bothering to sign up a room at the hotel; the Thorn hung around town, day after day, during which nothing happened; and then on the sixth night the bank had been robbed, virtually cleaned out; and now, as folks had known it would be if and when the Thorn hit this town, one of the town's gun experts would have to talk to Thorn.

Would it, they wondered this evening, be old Bill Marion, or Harry Sedgwick, or the Hilary kid. Naturally, the kid was the favored hopeful: old Bill was still fast and still sure, but certainly age had slowed his work to some extent; and Harry Sedgwick

was a family man who owed his life to his wife and sons; while, of course, the kid had none of these handicaps, and, most claimed, was faster than either of the others besides. . . .

It was a crazy thing he did, this hanging around a place after he had cleaned it. He always did it, as though from some inner compulsion, as from a kind of conscience, or decency, or pride. As though to give men a chance to punish him for his defiance of law, of decency and order.

Thorn smiled grimly, in the one corner of his mouth. The crazy thing about it, he thought, was not the foolish risk; oh no, not that at all; what was really crazy about it was his letting it salve his conscience, settle his pride. For there was nothing noble about it at all, not a whit of nobility—for Thorn never entered a town until he knew the capacity of all its gunmen, until he was sure that the job would be safe.

He let the twisted grin harden. He looked at himself in the bar mirror. He did not like what he saw and he dropped his eyes at once to his glass again.

Yes, he was loco all right. Plain, damn loco. A plain, damn fool who had never grown up.

Had to be tough, didn't he. Was good with a gun, and had to keep on showing men how good he was with it, didn't he. Cared so much about being a hardcase that he killed the only decent thing that had ever happened to him; lost forever the finest, loveliest girl in the world—yes, like the legends had it, for that part of the tales men told of the Thorn at least was true.

So now he was the notorious, feared Thorn. So now he was known as one of the fastest men with a gun in the West. So that was fine, wasn't it? So that was a fine accomplishment for a

grown man, wasn't it?

Thorn set his glass down with a strange gentleness. He went out of the saloon very quietly, very gently so to speak, and he moved along the broad-walk then not looking at anything or anybody. . . .

THEY were both riding in the same direction, and they talked as they jogged along.

The Hilary kid said: "Sure, I'll put it to him."

Eddie Hilary was eighteen; this other boy was no more than sixteen. This other boy had a round, soft blond face, and his eyes were very serious and frowning now.

"You will, eh, Eddie? You think you can do it, huh?"

"Sure."

"My dad was saying last night it was a job Harry Sedgwick should take care of, because Harry is a grown man, an experienced hand with a gun, and an experienced man with handling this sort of situation. My dad said he did not believe it was a job for a—a kid."

"Who's a kid?" Eddie Hilary was very mature with this boy, who, being the sky-pilot's son, was better educated than Eddie, but without the experience of life that being skillful with a six-gun gave one. "What's your dad mean, a kid?"

The younger boy laughed a little.

He said: "I guess he forgot all the experience you've had with a gun."

"Sure," Eddie said. Eddie was frowning now too. He was frowning and squinting up ahead, for the Miller place was now visible beyond the first rise.

The boys parted before they reached the Miller place, the preacher's lad went on down the west trail toward the town, Eddie Hilary turned in at the Miller's.

When Eddie Hilary saw Jenny Miller there by the corral, he said, "Hello,

Jenny."

She was a very pretty girl, Jenny Miller, and the soft evening light did not dim this. She had soft brown hair and deep brown eyes and she had a quiet way about her that already made her seem more a woman than a girl.

"Hello, Eddie." Her voice was very soft, and her eyes were very wide as she came out to meet Eddie, very wide and very worried-looking.

"I just wanted to stop by and tell you I might be late this evening. I've got some work I've got to do first. It's pretty important, and I didn't know about it when I made the date with you."

Jenny said very softly, "That's all right, Eddie." Without taking her eyes off his.

He looked down at the reins he'd kept in his hand when he stepped down. He ran his finger along the worn-smooth leather. He looked up again abruptly with a wide grin.

"Well, I guess that was about all I wanted to say, so I guess I'll—"

"Eddie, are you sure, do you feel sure you ought to do this? After all, you've never—"

"Am I sure? Well, why not? Who wins all the gun-shooting prizes around this country anyway? Who was it that Pecos marshal said had the fastest draw he'd ever seen, and he'd seen one heck of a lot of fast draws in his day? Me. That's who."

SHE put her head on one side, half in gentle laughter at his mock-boasting, half in greater worry, and she took his hand in hers.

"Oh, Eddie. —But this isn't the same as winning a shooting prize, Eddie," she added suddenly. "This isn't the same as drawing fast and hitting a tin-can before a bunch of cowhands hit it. It isn't the same at all, Eddie—"

"Why ain't it? What's a—a gunfight

anyway but a case of which man draws the fastest?"

Jenny Miller seemed to put her head on the side that way again, but it was more her look; it was more the concern that all his light talk could not drive away, that was there.

Jenny Miller watched Eddie Hilary ride out and toward the town then. He rode beautifully, Eddie did, and he was a fine thing moving out swiftly there against the setting sun.

Jenny Miller turned and rushed into the house. Her father was looking at her when she came in, and there was no expression on his face as he sat there beside the fireplace; he'd set his pipe aside.

He said, "Was that Eddie?"

"Yes, it was Eddie, and I think it is an awful thing that you men allow a—a boy to do a thing like this."

She had burst it, and she stood with fists clenched at her sides before her father, as though she were indicting him, as though the blame and decision in the business of Thorn were all on her father's head.

Her father looked at her a moment. Then he said, "Eddie ain't a boy, Jenny." He said it very gently.

And a minute later he said it again, "Eddie ain't a boy, Jenny. A man's got to have his first gunfight sometime; an' Eddie's better fixed for it than most of us ever was. Eddie's a natural with a six-gun."

Hiding behind his wife's skirts, that was what kept going through Harry Sedgwick's head. Over and over, whatever he did, wherever he went. Still a coward wasn't he? More of a coward than ever.

Harry Sedgwick had tried hard work, he'd tried new plans for expanding his place, all in an effort to forget this thing that ran through his head, but it was no use.

He was the one who should go meet

the Thorn in the dust. Not this Hilary kid. Not this green button Eddie Hilary.

He, Harry Sedgwick, was the one who would have the best chance against the Thorn, not a green button or a gray-beard.

Sure, the men of the town had excused him. Sure, they'd met at this house and at that one, and he's known that the concensus of it all had been that the man to meet the Thorn was young Eddie Hilary. He, Harry Sedgwick, had a wife and two kids to think of; he must not risk his life. And old fannin' Bill Marion was too rickety for such a job now.

Harry Sedgwick rode in slowly, and when his houses came into view he held his mount in carefully. His eyes narrowed and his lips tightened and he got tight in the saddle. Always a coward, that had been the story of his whole life. He'd gone down the dim trails when he was a kid because he'd been afraid of another kid in his town. He'd quit the dim trails because a showdown was looming with one of the outlaws in his crew.

BUT you couldn't run from cowardice; it went with you; it was always there with you; and sooner or later, Harry Sedgwick knew now, a man had to do something about it. Sooner or later, in order to live with himself, a man had to prove to himself that he was not a coward . . .

He stepped down in the yard. He unsaddled his line horse, switched the saddle deliberately to his big roan.

Then he went in the house.

His wife came and kissed him. She said that supper was ready, to wash up. His boy and his girl hung onto his legs and he dragged them into the kitchen that way, the way they liked it.

He said abruptly, "Bess, I've got to talk to you."

And she frowned of course, and in his office she still frowned but listened quietly.

"Bess this isn't easy to say. I've always been a coward, Bess. I've been running from one thing or another all my life. Now I've got to stop running."

He stopped and looked into her eyes.

She said: "I don't think I know what you're talking about, Harry." She kept her voice very quiet and calm, but it was plainly not the way she was feeling inside.

He looked down, and resumed.

"I don't expect you to understand, Bess. This is something that is my problem and my problem alone—and I tell you about it only because I know it's important to our future, to our life together—to Bill's and Anne's future. It's something I owe to you all—"

He paused uncertainly, and then his expression was very earnest.

"This is the thing, Bess? I've got to go meet the Thorn tonight. Sure, I know the men have excused me because I'm a married man, but they know and I know that I'd have a better chance against the Thorn than his Hilary boy. They're not saying it, naturally, but it's there—it's there, Bess, and I can't hide from it—"

That was all of the talk. There was nothing else Bess could say, and Harry Sedgwick did not feel that she expected him to explain further.

He got his gun in his office and he strapped on his gun-belt and he tried the gun a few times in the holster and he found it easy and good there and he went out and he kissed Bess and he didn't look at the kids playing there on the floor and he went out and swung aboard and headed for town. . . .

It had been a thing that folks had talked about many times: What if two outlaws hit a town at the same time? What if two of the notorious, unbeatable ones had decided to clean the same

bank within the same hour?

It had made good talk. It had stirred imagination. Folks had talked about it a lot because they knew it could never happen, they were sure of course of that.

It happened in the town of Boulder on this particular evening. It did actually happen. Two notorious, unbeatable, fast-draw kings descended on the town of Boulder within the same hour.

Thorn himself, one of the two, was the first to be aware of its happening.

He was moving rapidly along the boardwalk with his mind made up about a very important thing: He was going to get the money from his saddle-roll, the money he'd stolen from the bank the previous night, and return it to the bank. He was going to do this and if the sheriff wanted to take him, he was going to surrender without a fight. He, the notorious gunman, bank-robber, killer, the notorious Thorn, was going to do a decent thing for once in his life. He was going to settle up before he died. And if settling up would involve dying itself, by a hangnoose, by the neck until he was a corpse, he was ready for it.

Yes, the Thorn had gone loco all right; or mebbeso he'd gone good sense for the first time in his life; moving along the boardwalk now his smile was grim, his lips were hard-twisted, but for the first time in his life, the Thorn knew an inner peace, and it showed in his eyes; for the first time in his life, he felt that he was wholly alive, wholly a human being—wholly a man; and it showed in the Thorn's eyes and in the lines of his face; and Thorn suddenly wondered if he might not suddenly burst out laughing right there on the main street. . . .

That was when the Thorn saw the horsemen easing in at the end of the

street. It was deep dusk now, and the faces were not recognizable, but Thorn would have known that first rider in the dark, he would have known that first rider anywhere, from the actual *feel* of him, from the menace that he actually seemed to project ahead of him.

Bud Kilroy. The brimstone's own Bud Kilroy. The one and only Bud Kilroy.

"Kilroy," Thorn said aloud.

Thorn stood there feet apart on the boardwalk. Kilroy and his henchmen had pulled to a stop in the design of a tight knot around the outlaw leader.

A six-gun blossomed in the right hand of Bud Kilroy. The muzzle of it put the death sign of the Thorn's chest. And the Thorn smiled calmly.

The Thorn had looked into the black bore of too many guns to know concern at it. The Thorn had looked at too many men holding two guns dead on him and they, not he, had quickly known residence in boothill.

"The Thorn, eh," Kilroy said then. His voice was ugly, raspy, hoarse, nasal. It had the depth and breadth of untold evil in its harsh tones.

Kilroy, in his turn, had heard of the too many times when the Thorn had turned the tables on antagonists who had him colddecked in their gunsights. Kilroy's eyes glittered evilly in the weak moonlight.

Kilroy deliberately pulled the trigger, once, twice. Only Bud Kilroy would have done it this way: completely without daring, without a vestige of honor, without a vestige of pride. Only Bud Kilroy was an artist at cold-blooded slaughter.

The Thorn felt the fire in his chest, felt the hard smashes as though a man stood at ten paces and hurled two rocks at him; the Thorn thought in that instant, oddly: *So I don't get that chance to go out decently; so I don't get that*

chance to settle up.

Then there was no Bud Kilroy, no dim moonlight, no main street nor the need to go for his guns. The blackness took over, blotted it all for the Thorn....

WORD had got around that tonight young Eddie Hilary was coming to town and put it to the Thorn—flatly accuse the Thorn of robbing the bank, mow him down if he refused to hand over the loot or allow his belongings to be searched. Folks were at windows, men were in doorways. The little sign on the door of the sheriff's office was still plainly there, with its meaningful advice that the lawman, who had gone to the county seat "on business" in the middle of the week, would be back in ten days; that The Law expected every Citizen to be a self-elected deputy in the event of any Defiance of the Law within the Town of Boulder....

Eddie Hilary had ridden in at just the moment when the Thorn had come out of the saloon. He'd had the impulse to shout at Thorn, call him there and then without dallying, but the shout had stuck in Eddie's throat.

He'd kept his eye on Thorn as he stepped down in front of the hotel, hitchracked his horse.

That was where he stood when Bud Kilroy cut down the Thorn up at the far end of town.

He wrinkled up his nose at sight of this cold-blooded murder. His hand crept instinctively to his gun, then away from it as his fingers touched it.

And what kind of a gunfight, Eddie Hilary asked himself, was this? And could it be possible that thus easily the Thorn, the gun-fast-famous Thorn, had been put down in the dust—without his even putting a hand to a gun?

Bud Kilroy and his crew were moving on into the center of the town. Slowly, ominously. Townsfolk, prominently

in windows and doorways now, on the boardwalk up and down its length, banked on the verandas of the hotel and the saloon—watched it, uncertain.

Then Bud Kilroy showed his hand, all five cards, and then a townsman recognized Kilroy and word slithered along the street—"It's Bud Kilroy!"

All five cards—for one of Kilroy's segundos had stepped down and jabbed the butt of his saddlegun through the lock on the sheriff's door, had booted the loose-swinging smashed door ahead of him and gone inside. And saddleguns had bristled in the hands of every son flanking the outlaw chief.

Townsmen exchanged quick glances. One oldster hollered gruffly in the dead silence,

"What th' hell yuh think yo're pullin' there—"

And the six-gun blossomed again in Kilroy's hand and the spit of flame timed exactly with the graybeard's Stetson flipping up and then into the dust crazily. There in the crown of the hat the neat black hole was strangely featured in a sheet of moonlight that had broken from behind fat clouds. There in the crown of the oldster's hat was the clear and exact promise of what was in store for any other citizen who caused the outlaw to lower his aim a bare, deadly inch.

Bud Kilroy's deep rasp was there in the tense silence.

"Silence, old man."

A KIND of a smile set on Bud Kilroy's hard-thin lips now. He rocked slowly along the street, with a full dozen hardcases behind him, and the only sounds were the horses hooves chuffing in the dust and the scruch of saddle leather.

They stopped in front of the hotel. They pulled up in a loose half-circle with their rifles hanging seemingly forgotten.

Bud Kilroy said, and he raised his voice somewhat for this:

"All right, throw in your guns. Throw 'em in the middle of the street." He talked mechanically, boredly, and his tone did not change as he went on. "Any gent with his gun still in his holster after I count ten will get rifle bullets in his belly. An' I ain't countin' out loud." . . .

Eddie Hilary's heart, the boy found, was pounding the loudest he'd ever heard it. For heck's sake, he gritted to himself, for he doubted if a gun-king like, well, like the Thorn or Bud Kilroy were ever bothered with the thump, thump of their hearts when they were going into a gunfight.

Eddie Hilary got a grip on himself. He was standing directly in front of Bud Kilroy and the hanging saddleguns of his crew. He heard, and he saw in his field-vision, the guns many of the men of the town were quickly depositing in the dust of the street, as the weapons clumped heavily and flickered in the moonlight bouncing.

Eddie tensed, got a very firm grip on himself; tried to ignore the mad pounding of his heart.

He took a quick step backwards, held his hands in front of him stiff, out in front of him, like he'd seen gunmen do when they were set to go for it.

"All right," he heard his voice saying then, "all right, Kilroy—go for it!"

Bud Kilroy was noted for not having a sense of humor. He was noted for taking no time for humor. Ordinarily Bud Kilroy would have simply mowed this button upstart down in his tracks and not wasted a moment's thought over it.

It was the way Eddie Hilary's voice cracked, squeaked on the word "go;" it was that that stopped Bud Kilroy. It was that signaled Bud Kilroy that here was nothing, here was a completely green kid; and having just cut down

the famed Thorn, Bud Kilroy was perhaps looking down from a greater eminence than usual.

His black, snake-small eyes flickered the fraction of an instant. The rifles in the hands of his segundos moved up a short arc, not in Eddie Hilary's direction, but in a general covering sweep as warning to any other citizen who might choose to throw in his lot with this salty button.

Humor played stiffly in a corner of Bud Kilroy's eye then. And he said to Eddie Hilary:

"Don't you figure you oughta get yore maw to dry yuh behind the ears before she lets you out of the house with that big gun?"

HARRY SEDGWICK'S arrival, at any other moment, would have gained a great deal of notice. Now it had turned not a single head. He had moved into town virtually in Eddie Hilary's dust. He had stepped down at the hitchrack the other side of the saloon. He had taken his place in a doorway along the street and had become a spectator along with the other citizens.

One of Kilroy's segundos was moving along the boardwalk now, flicking his eye at gun-holsters, checking them. Another was moving along the center of the street, gathering guns into a short sack.

The holster-checker was moving along undisturbed by the Eddie Hilary challenge. He did not look back even briefly at sound of it.

Harry Sedgwick thought: This is the moment, son. This is your big moment. This is your chance to prove once and for all that you're no coward—

In another minute the holster-checker would be in front of him. In another second Bud Kilroy would certainly blast young Eddie Hilary off the face of the earth—

And then the fear, the awful fear, was in Harry Sedgwick like every other time. A living, awful, tearing thing. Ripping his vitals out of him, ripping his very guts out of the center of him. So that his muscles turned to water, so that his will ceased to exist.

And Harry Sedgwick was still standing there in that doorway, a paradoxical combination of stiff-frozen and jelly-soft man, when the holster-checker's eye lit satanically on his full leather.

"In the dust," the segundo said softly. He didn't raise the muzzle of the drooping saddle rifle in his arm-crook.

But Harry Sedgwick just stood there, unable to do one thing or another, staring helplessly first at the tense incident up the street, next at this black-faced gent in front of him.

The black-faced gent did not know the temper of consideration or mercy any better than his leader. Without any indication that it was in his mind, he merely raised the saddlegun and shot away gun and holster and a piece of Harry Sedgwick's hip, without aiming except roughly, without flickering an eyelash.

The black-faced segundo moved on to the next townsmen. Their guns were in the dust and he kept on with his inspection, moving slowly, deliberately from doorway to doorway.

Harry Sedgwick put a hand, as in a daze, to his hip. He felt the warm wetness there. . . .

And Bud Kilroy was saying to Eddie Hilary: "Yuh don't challenge a man to a fight when he's still on his horse." And Bud Kilroy was stepping down as he talked. "Yuh wait until he's got his two feet on the ground, like you got." And Bud Kilroy was down now, and suddenly he'd laid the hard knuckles of the back of his hand across young Eddie Hilary's eyes and Eddie was staggering back looking through great lopsided tears. And then those hard

knuckles were in Eddie Hilary's eyes again, and the boy was reaching, groping, for his gun, but when his fingers reached it the knuckles seemed to come so hard that young Eddie Hilary knew that it didn't matter any longer if he did find his gun with his fingers, he wouldn't know where to shoot with it, because he could no longer see, he'd not know where to aim.

AND young Eddie Hilary was staggering, weak-kneed, back with his head hanging, his left arm up in an effort to defend himself. And Bud Kilroy was following leisurely, keeping the back of that hard hand in there until he'd broken the kid.

And that was how two famed badmen came to Boulder within the same day, and what happened when they met, and what the men of Boulder did to cope with them. That was, in other words, how Bud Kilroy came to Boulder and swept everything and everybody before him. . . .

Kilroy found the money in Thorn's saddle roll soon enough. And when word of it got around, hate temporarily shifted back to Thorn, and for a long time that morning the medico just stood and glared at Thorn lying there in the back room of the sawbones' office, as though he might be contemplating letting the outlaw die right there now. And townsfolk somehow felt more loathing for Thorn than for Bud Kilroy, for, losing, Thorn took on the appearance of a sneakthief who'd got caught at his snitching, while a kind of romance grew up, in contrast, around Kilroy for his power, his success at getting what he went after.

And Kilroy sensed this psychology quickly enough. He'd learned that sheer unstoppable power will be sure to win a kind of admiration in people, even in the hearts of people he was smashing.

And this particular success in Boulder, where he'd taken not only a town but also the taw of a famed rival, caused Bud Kilroy to wish to savor his triumph, and he decided not to move on at the time originally set.

Maybe Bud Kilroy would start spreading out. Maybe Bud Kilroy might consider switching from notorious outlaw to great range-baron.

Maybe Bud Kilroy would start right here—start by bossing this sizeable trail town, and then spreading out from there. Letting the citizens go about their business, but exacting a toll from each of them for the privilege of having him as their range-king. . . .

He moved to the railing of the veranda of the hotel. He stood there with the little smile on his lips. They were soft lips. A trim little mustache set above them. Bud Kilroy's face was soft, too, soft and round, and until you reached the eyes, you might have appraised Kilroy as a weak young man who wore a mustache to cover his weak, soft lips; but you reached the eyes quickly, they drew you, and then you recast our estimate: the eyes were snake-eyes, black, cold, cruel, completely humorless, completely merciless.

The town was moving about its business again as though gingerly. The town was waiting for Bud Kilroy to move on, so the U.S. Marshall could be put on his trail again; for Kilroy had guards posted on all the outgoing trails, and such notice could not be given until he went.

CATTLEMEN came in, went into the bank quietly, calmly as though the bank had not been just cleaned; went in, evidently, to try to learn in whispers the true state of the thing. Shops were open, the saloons were open for business. But the Kilroy segundos were everywhere; Harry Sedgwick was

home in bed with a bad hip; Eddie Hilary was in jail, along with the sheriff himself; old Bill Marion was pacing his ramshackle ranchhouse wrestling with first this idea, then another, how he could taken down his old black-handled Colts and face down Kilroy and his crew, and finally, of course, dropping every notion he studied as impossible, out of the question, even for a case-hardened, whang-leather oldster such as he. . . .

Bud Kilroy said, "I think we'll stay."

One of his lieutenants was inside the doorway, but no other was near. This one came out.

"You talkin' to me, boss?"

Bud Kilroy didn't turn. He said.

"I'm talking to the whole town. I said I think we'll stick here."

The segundo smiled widely, not understanding.

"Yuh mean we ain't ridin' out to-night? Ain't we got all there is tuh get around here, boss?"

Bud Kilroy turned to his segundo. He smiled very pleasantly.

"We haven't got all the ranches around here, have we? We'll stay and take them too."

The segunda frowned amiably, not savvying.

"Sure," he said.

They had a meeting at the sheriff's office. Kilroy called in all the ranchers of the country and he talked to them. He told them plainly that he was boss in Boulder now. Mayor, sheriff, king. Boulder was henceforth Bud Kilroy's town. Anybody questioning this by word of mouth, to Kilroy's face or behind his back, or with gun-talk, would be thrown in jail at best, hung at worst; more likely hung.

They threw the kid, Eddie Hilary, out of the jail without his guns. They collected all the guns in town and out. They had to hit old Bill Marion on the head with a gun-butt.

And Bud Kilroy took up headquarters in the rear office of the big saloon, and he began collecting taxes immediately. You had no money, because the bank had just been cleaned? Pay in cattle then. Pay in land deeds.

The men of Boulder stood around staring, their feet braced apart, their holsters empty. Old Bill Marion stood on his veranda rubbing his head where the big bump still was. Harry Sedgwick, up now, stood at his front window gazing bitterly out over his spread. Young Eddie Hilary met Jenny Miller on the street of the town and he looked at her and he took his hat off and he ran his hand through his hair and he didn't say anything. And the Thorn sat in the big chair in the rear of the medico's while his gun wounds mended, and the medico stared at him balefully and Thorn said once, "It's damned white of you, doc, tuh wait on me like this—" but seeing the sawbones' face then Thorn knew it was no use going on, and he became quiet. . . .

Jenny Miller's voice was husky, as though she hadn't used it for quite a while.

SHE said, "Hello, Eddie." Then she said, "I was going to the emporium. Do you want to walk along with me?"

Eddie had ridden into town for groceries, but he didn't feel that he wanted to be seen around with Jenny. He meant, he told himself, he did not believe Jenny would probably care to be seen around with him.

He made a mumled excuse and he moved on along the broadwalk and Jenny's eyes followed him very worried. He ran his hand through his hair and he sort of kept his eyes on the broadwalk or squinted up ahead of him not looking at anything actually.

So the men of Boulder moved around like that, or stood around, silent like that, or almost silent, and nobody

seemed to be able to think what to do about Bud Kilroy.

The blame was put on no one. Except by those who thought it was all their fault. Except by Harry Sedgwick, and Eddie Hilary, and old Bill Marion, and the Thorn.

If he hadn't been a damned snivelling coward, Harry Sedgwick told himself, he would have stood up to Kilroy, and the men of the town would have backed him in that psychological moment, and Kilroy would have been cleared out before he'd even set foot in the town.

And Eddie Hilary told himself something very much like that, though his thoughts perhaps were not so clear on it all.

And Old Bill Marion asked himself where the hell was the old Bill Marion of the wild trail days, and where the hell was the gunspeed and daring that men had once associated with old Bill?

And the Thorn said to himself: So you wanted to do one decent thing before you went out—and you didn't have the stuff to see even that through. . . .

The Thorn tried getting up from the chair. His chest was very stiff, and the pain cut at him a couple of times, but he stood down on the floor successfully.

Then he started for the front office, and not seeing the medico around, he went to the front window and looked out. He saw his reflection halfway in the window, where the glass was backed up by the dark shade lying along the street. He combed at his hair mechanically. He ran a hand back along his unshaved cheek. He did not think he looked very good.

He saw the man crossing the street. He didn't think about the man at first and then he did think about him.

Because it was Bud Kilroy.

He raised one eyebrow, and in that moment Thorn was something like what Thorn could really be. The sure, bright fire was in his eye, the grey of it

was steely, quite.

He remembered that of course he did not have a gun. His eyes flickered about the room, combed it in that second, saw that no weapon was in evidence. Thorn did not move as Bud Kilroy came toward the medico's.

KILROY had two of them with him. Kilroy did not know bravado, show, greatness. Kilroy owed his survival to cold, crass care, to doubling and redoubling his concern with his own self preservation. So the two lieutenants went first as they approached the medico's. They opened the door and went in ahead of Kilroy. They had their guns in their hands the moment they saw Thorn standing there, and the surprise of finding him silent a few feet from the door caused them to brace as they drew, caused Kilroy to pause cat-like outside, hands moving quickly, quietly to gunbelts and hooking there at the ready.

"Hy yuh, Thorn," one of the lieutenants snarled, mostly to tell Kilroy how it was.

"He's got no gun," the other lieutenant reported, and Kilroy came up a step.

Kilroy said, "Take him." Then Kilroy added from outside, without seeing yet how it was with Thorn, "Make a funny move, Thorn, and I'll put a bullet through your head. Take it quiet and you'll stay alive."

Kilroy repeated to his lieutenant: "I said bring him."

"Out," the lieutenant said to Thorn with a switch of his head and his gun.

Thorn kept the eyebrow up. There seemed to be a scornful smile on his face as a result, though his lips had not moved. And the segundos were not at all comfortable, even with guns cold on Thorn's chest. Thorn's reputation was too great to forget it so quickly; Thorn's personality was too

deep with the gun-story behind him to treat him other than gingerly. Only a Kilroy could stand up to a gent of Thorn's stature, and he did it because he was not a man with imagination, and what little imagination he might have had he kept suppressed.

Thorn saw another figure coming across the street then. The medico. He was a little man who always seemed in a bad humor but who actually was very generous and very kindly. Thorn had learned this while he was in his care, had come to like and respect the little sawbones though he knew the latter hated him thoroughly.

The medico said: "Now what the hell are you doing, Kilroy?"

"You keep your face shet, sawbones," one of the segundos said. Kilroy kept his eyes on Thorn as Thorn moved through the door.

The medico watched Thorn take the steps stiffly. The medico pulled his mouth in hard and he did not say anything at first. Then he said suddenly:

"That man isn't in shape to be moved yet. He'll bleed to death if you move him now, if you make him move."

Nobody answered the medico, however. The Thorn gave him a smile and said, "Thanks for the pills, doc," but the others did not speak, and the Thorn moved slowly up the broadwalk toward the saloon and the edge of town with the segundos directly behind him with guns in their hands and Kilroy behind them with his thumbs still hooked in his gunbelts.

At the edge of town Kilroy said, "You can feel honored, Thorn. I don't usually take a hand in these matters. This once I did though. Because I wanted personally to see you taken care of."

THORN still had the eyebrow half up. He wore a very patient smile. He bestowed it on Kilroy very calmly,

but Kilroy did not see it because Kilroy did not look at a man ordinarily when he spoke to him.

Kilroy said, "All right, lace him up."

"Lace him up" consisted of tying Thorn's hands tightly behind him, shoving him up on the back of a horse that had been appropriated no doubt from a townsman for "back taxes," tying one ankle to the other under the animal's belly.

Without any further talk, Kilroy moved his horse up beside Thorn's, suddenly jabbed a spur deep into the unsuspecting flank, and Thorn was lurching precariously down the trail on the back of the pain-enraged mount.

Kilroy said to nobody, "Good-bye, Thorn," which was quite an amusing remark for the notably humorless outlaw.

The trouble was, it was too easy not to fight. Kilroy kept to his quarters in the rear of the saloon largely, and his segundos gave up parading the streets with half-hung Winchesters. And Kilroy, with the instinct of a natural crooked empire-builder, sucked his "taxes" in bits, in installments, never really socking a rancher with a big toll at a single time, so that they did not seem to hurt too much.

So that put it up to the men of Boulder: Pay these trifling dividends to Kilroy and go about their usual business in peace—or organize in secret, attack in strength one dark night, fight it out to the bitter end with Kilroy and his crew and take the town back for free men? Stay alive and pay the practically unnoticeable taxes Kilroy set—or die fighting for this freedom?

The trouble was, yes, it was too easy not to fight. Old Bill Marion did a little ranting that nobody listened to, neither Kilroy segundo nor Boulder townsman. Harry Sedgwick called on a couple of the bigger ranchers, talked halfway about something had to be done, and

the ranchers agreed, but all of them knowing that none of them really had any stomach for the job. The kid Eddie Hilary accepted his father's advice: better lie low for the time being.

It was too easy not to fight, and that was the way the thing went. That was the way Kilroy figured it would go. And that was all Kilroy needed to tighten his grip on the town, and ready it for when he decided to double the taxes, triple them, quadruple them. . . .

It was easy, but it was not comfortable. It was no good, any citizen of Boulder would have admitted if he'd had the guts to reveal what he felt down deep inside him.

Men greeted each other with a queer sheepishness. Smiles were weak. Talk was half-embarrassed.

Eddie Hilary called on Jenny Miller one evening. After a long interval. He had trouble meeting her eyes. He had trouble talking to her. It was this thing, here too.

He looked out over the stretch to the lowhills, where the moon washed with mystic serenity. He sat there beside her on the veranda and he hadn't put his hat down and he turned it in his fingers looking out there.

"What an evening, huh," he said.

Jenny said softly: "It's beautiful."

AND they'd look out there and there'd be nothing to say somehow, and he went home early, and riding out pulling his Stetson down hard over his eyes he mumbled to himself,

"What the hell, what the hell anyway. You'd think the whole damned thing was my fault—"

And thus he'd finally expressed it to himself, as many another man of Boulder might well have, strangely, done too. And young Eddie Hilary gritted his teeth, and pulled his hat brim down hard again, and muttered, "Damn," and rode home. And shook his head once,

but that was all. . . .

Jenny Miller did not look up to watch Eddie ride out. Not until he'd moved far out behind the moon wash.

She got her horse and rode out slowly in the same direction. She did not know why she did this. All she knew was she was somehow not ready to go to bed this night in the usual routine, and get up to another day to its usual routine. Not the way things were. Not with the whole town, the whole range slinking around with their tails between their legs. Not while the men of Boulder were willing to compromise their very souls simply to keep their hides whole.

Sure, maybe it was easy for her, a girl, to think like this. A girl didn't have to do the fighting, the dying.

Or didn't she?

Why couldn't she begin the fight? Why couldn't she, as well as any other citizen of the town, be the first to stand up to Kilroy?

But then reason set in for Jenny Miller as it had for every man of the town, and reason cooled off this girl as it had the men: Where would you start? How would you start? How would you organize the thing without Kilroy getting wind of it? And if you did not pull it off perfectly, what hell would ensue—if you and your fellow citizens didn't smash Kilroy, what revenge, what ghastly toll would the outlaw take to repay you and your fellow citizens? And even if you won, would the cost in dead and wounded be worth the re-won freedom? And, finally, who was she, Jenny Miller, to decide the lives and deaths of all the folks of Boulder range? Who was she to endanger their homes and happiness by approaching them with a plan for revolution and so involving them in the thing, so bringing the outlaw chief's wrath down on their innocent heads should he learn of the conniving?

And Jenny Miller turned her horse's

head and rode back to the house.

Maybe it was a coincidence that brought the Thorn back to Boulder on a Saturday night—or more likely it was Fate. Certainly the legends that were sure to grow out of the thing would credit it to Fate, and certainly with reason.

HE rode in perhaps an hour or two after sunset. He drew no notice at first because he rode straight up and quiet. If light had touched his face, this might have been different: for though light might not necessarily have revealed that this was the Thorn, it certainly would have uncovered the terrible pain the man had been and still was suffering. If light had touched Thorn's face, word should have quickly run the length of the town that a ghastly gun-ghost had just ridden in.

Yes, Thorn had known great pain these many days. He didn't know why he was still alive, for he had bled profusely and he had eaten practically nothing. He had finally got his hands loose but moving on horseback had not been easier untied than tied.

The idea had recurred, was what motivated him—the idea he'd had from the beginning, and that he saw no reason now to abandon. One decent thing, he wanted to do, before he went out, and since it was too late now to do it in a decent man's way, he would have to do it in his own way—with a gun.

Would it not be a decent thing to rid Boulder, this town he'd wronged and that had repaid him by trying to nurse him back to health, to rid Boulder of the scourge that threatened to consume it completely? Would it not be a decent thing if somehow he could take Bud Kilroy out with him when he went?

No, he didn't know at all whether he could accomplish this; he was very uncertain about that. But by heaven he would try, he would do his damndest,

and no man, decent or not, could do more than that. . . .

Bud Kilroy, Thorn knew, had his headquarters in the rear of the saloon, and Thorn knew there was no time to waste reaching his goal roundabout. He stepped down in front of the saloon, let his reins droop over the hitchrack half-tied. The blackness would swoop at him, and fear would clutch his heart thinking maybe this was it, maybe this was the end, but he'd wait, and strength would come again and he'd move on again.

He took the steps steadily, carefully, his eyes straight ahead. He did not put his hand to the post, kept it quiet down beside his holster.

The gun he'd picked up along with the saddle and the horse. He'd traded the horse Kilroy had tied him to, which had been a fine palomino, for his present nag with some cash and some equipment thrown in. He didn't know the gun. He had not had the energy, the spirit to test it. He saw the bullets in it when he made the swap, and that had been enough.

The Thorn did not move up onto the saloon veranda unnoticed. Scarcely. For this was Saturday night, this was when Boulder ranchers came in for revelry or supplies or both. And this night found old Bill Marion just coming out of the livery as the ominous figure staggered up the steps of the saloon; and Harry Sedgwick moving along the boardwalk loaded with groceries; and young Eddie Hilary about to ride out with Jenny Miller.

FOLKS along the boardwalk who first saw Thorn step down had slowed their pace instinctively. And at the first staggering step he took, then caught himself before proceeding, the whispers began to run.

Those along the boardwalk who didn't stop, slowed. Within thirty sec-

onds the town sensed that something was in the air, and all eyes went inevitably to the tall grim figure moving up the saloon steps.

One man quickened his pace along the street. A Kilroy segundo. He'd been on the hotel veranda, he'd quickly stepped to the street and come swiftly to the saloon.

The segundo had not come quite swiftly enough however. For at the moment he'd reached the saloon steps, Bud Kilroy came through the batwings—came through the batwings face to face with Thorn.

Thorn smiled, calmly. With the pain, and the waves of blackness threatening, Thorn smiled, and the smile came from deep within.

He said, "Hello, Kilroy." In a mocking tone, as though mocking the conditions of their last meeting.

Bud Kilroy's soft face did not change expression. He did not move the cigarette that hung from half-parted soft lips. But the fear was there, and Thorn saw; it was there, plainly.

"You won't beat me to the draw this time, Kilroy," Thorn said.

Bud Kilroy's expression still did not change. He stood there as still as marble, the batwings still dying out pendulum-like behind him. His eye did not seem to change either, but the signal was in it nevertheless, and Thorn saw it. Kilroy was obviously signaling to a henchman behind Thorn. . . .

It was one of those split-second occasions that Thorn knew well, but suddenly the Thorn knew he wasn't going to be up to this one. Suddenly he knew that if he tried to whirl, tried to take the henchman and Kilroy at the same time, it would be too much for him, and he'd do neither.

He said fast, "Go for it, Kilroy," but it wasn't going to be fast enough; the henchman would have him before he could draw, even now, with Kilroy. . . .

Somehow, the blow he expected didn't come from behind. He had decided in that split second to concentrate on smashing Kilroy come what would, and somehow he was being able to go through with it.

He felt his weapon hammering in his palm. He felt it line up in his fingers and he felt the timing of it and the aiming of it become one terrible, sure, lethal thing—and he saw Bud Kilroy being smashed and doubled back through the batwings, as definitely, as finally as if he'd been slashing at Kilroy's belly with a fist of steel.

THE Thorn went down too then. Not from a blow, not from the weapon of another. The Thorn was simply done, through—dead. The Thorn went to his knees and his gun in his hand and his head touched the boards at the same time, and there was a smile on his face that the boards scraping it did not remove.

The Thorn never knew what happened—never guessed that it had been more luck that had given him his chance to ride onto eternal range a man. . . . Jenny Miller had seen what had happened. On her horse beside Eddy Hilary on his, there in the street in front of the saloon, she had seen the segundo behind Thorn lift his gun to bring the butt crashing down on Thorn's head—and she'd suddenly exploded into action.

She'd been carrying a sack of table crockery, and a heavy cup had been projecting. This had been the first thing at hand, and she'd grabbed it—had slung it with force and accuracy at the back of the head of the segundo.

It had done the trick—it had given Thorn the split-second he'd needed—but it had not of course stopped the segundo. The latter had ducked with the blow, had whirled switching his gun in his hand to be used as a cutter

instead of a club.

And Eddie Hilary had taken his turn at sudden action when he reckoned the segundo's intention—of blasting this damned girl to kingdom come. He'd dived, straight at the segundo, and the outlaw's gun had gone off, had smashed a bullet through Eddie's clothing but without scathing him. Eddie had taken the outlaw to the ground with his weight, and as they scrambled half up, a fast-brought-up knee by the youngster had surprised even him with its effectiveness.

It caught the outlaw under the chin, there was the click and crunch of teeth and jawbone, and the segundo was out, his gun flinging wide.

"Get the gun, Eddie!" Jenny screamed then. "Get the gun!"

And she hurled the balance of her sack of crockery flush in the face of another segundo who had come rusing up gun out.

Harry Sedgwick stood momentarily transfixed. His eyes swiftly took it all in as he stood there. Abruptly he'd dropped his groceries plunk on the boardwalk. And seeing his first chance, he stuck out a foot fast in front of a running segundo who'd ignored him as he rushed by.

"Whoop-ee!" from old Bill Marion sealed the thing. His was the battle-cry, his was the signal for every man of Boulder to go to it, here was their big chance.

A rifleman in a second-story window of the hotel was attracted by this to the old man.

He drew a bead on him and dropped him in his tracks.

And Eddie Hilary, not very self-conscious now, not very self-conscious at all, automatically had brought his uncanny gun-skill into play, and he'd snapped a shot at where he saw the gun-flash and the rifleman had slumped on the windowsill.

AND Harry Sedgwick was suddenly yelling, taking up the torch from Bill Marion,

The men of Boulder were doing it just that way, for Bud Kilroy had never returned their guns after his move-in, and the men of Boulder were having to take whatever guns they wanted to use, barehanded from the Kilroy segundos.

It was costly, it cost lives, that first rush, for the Kilroy henchmen poured out of the saloon and the hotel and restaurant slamming lead.

Harry Sedgwick went down with his big arms locked around the necks of two outlaws, and he went down yelling defiance happily. And the guns of the outlaws he choked the life out of thus, were quickly snatched up by Boulder citizens and used to good effect.

Young Eddie Hilary lead the final rush on the saloon. Young Eddie Hilary accepted the surrender of those trapped in the saloon finally. And Jenny Miller was at his side, and when they at last took time to look at each other, she cried, "Eddie, you've been hurt badly!"

But Eddie Hilary did not know about the blood dripping from his forehead, he saw only the blood smeared on Jenny's face, and he took her shoulder in his big hand and said,

"Listen, you're the one that's hurt! . . ."

And thus Boulder had its freedom. And much later, Jenny Hilary said to her husband Eddie, it wasn't at so very great cost either, was it?

And they hadn't had the courage or the vision to try it on their own initiative; they'd needed chance to start them, they'd had to be pushed by Fate.

The Thorn? No, Boulder felt no gratitude toward the Thorn; Boulder never knew what brought the Thorn back. But that would not have mattered to Thorn; Thorn would have said that Fate had been kind to him too. . . .

CALL HIS HAND, COWARD— WITH CUTTERS

By
RALPH BERARD

A powdersmoke proposition Lars Kelly was offering the trail wolf—a chance to ride onto eternal range behind smoking guns!

THE bright yellow of the big hanging oil lamps in Kal Rindhard's Purple Palace gambling hall lost its brilliance in clouds of stale tobacco smoke that billowed between the rough fir joists of the unfinished ceiling to gradually eke its way out into the starlit night through chinks in the new shake rook. Rough prospectors played faro at the tables. Scantily clad girls danced with carefree young miners who would give an ounce of fresh raw gold only to rub matted whiskers against their painted cheeks and then laugh down more of Kal Rindhard's rawgut whiskey.

Three weeks before gold had been found in Sulphur Creek. Its clairion call had echoed across the Sierras, across the painted desert, down San Francisco way. Rough men had come, weak men, women, wives, sisters, Chinamen, thieves, cut-throats and—Kal Rindhard, fifty, sleek, pale-cheeked, blackcoated with white waistcoat, plain black tie with diamond-studded tiepin gambler. He wore two sixguns in neatly crossed belts which were the more deadly because of their plain, unpretentious but business-like arrangement. And in such a brief time his Purple Palace Emporium had been completed because the gold find was genuine and Kal Rindhard's past impelled him toward mastery of this promising new hell town that had bloomed to such spontaneous maturity.

This was opening night. Kal Rindhard's gift to Sulphur Creek was free whiskey (none the less deadly because it was free), the music of a tin pan orchestra so bad the granite bases of the very mountains must have trembled at it, and Rindhard's whispered instructions to his painted girls to deny the men nothing. "They'll pay later," he assured them and grinned.

The place was jammed to overflowing. Its new cedar-smelling timbers rocked to boisterous sounds of merriment. Hell was on the loose and it was ten minutes to twelve when there was a slow creaking sound at the rough boarded front doors.

Many men had swung through those doors this night, drunken young miners, more slow-moving and cautious oldsters, Kal Rindhard's gun-toting henchmen, Jade Kameroon, Platty Drumskin and Kassy Redwine. But the door squeaked now more ominously, more jerkily and slow until it caught the attention of some of the men who lounged nearest.

The lower part of a crutch appeared first and as the door opening widened a man's crippled leg and then the man himself. And his appearance was such that it brought a breath-held involuntary hush to the nondescript lot of revelers who turned to look.

Lars Pordeen hobbled with the aid of one crooked crutch and a too-short hickory cane inside the room and looked about, defiantly meeting the

shocked stares of those who stood a moment numbed to silence at sight of his crippled condition.

Lars was fifty, though you could not tell that to look at the remnants of his scarred face in which only one eye was good. That one, though, was bright and not unpleasant if a man could meet it without thinking too much of the black cloth that hid the other and not the mutilations elsewhere so apparent. For his one leg was twisted grotesquely and his shoulders were hunched.

He stood a moment and grinned if that unholy mask of face were capable of that, then his bony hand reached forth for a chair recently vacated. He leaned his crutch handy and managed to seat himself.

The revelers, after a momentary shudder, resumed their hilarity. Jade Kameroon, who tonight was Rindhard's doorman, stepped close to the stranger. "Lookin' fer someone right particular?" The gunman's voice held no inviting tone of welcome.

Lars looked up. His voice was pleasant, almost honeyed, the one appealing thing left him. "I'll have a word with Kal," he said quietly, "when he's got the time."

KAMEROON looked puzzled. He glanced questioningly toward the back of the room where the black-coated gambler leaned against the bar, then said, "The boss's pretty busy. Yuh'll have t' wait a considerable spell."

"Been waiting thirty years," Lars Pordeen sighed. He crossed his misshapen legs in a crude tangle. "Couple more hours won't make no matter." He let himself relax and become oblivious to his surroundings unmindful of the fact that the mere sight of him had chilled the place.

In that place there was one young

man, neat, cleanshaven, in his late twenties, who was neither drunk nor particularly pleased with the wild confusion of Kal Rindhard's emporium. Rex Bradley swung across the room now, with his charming young wife who was blushing astonished at their slumming tour of the goings-on. He spoke to the crippled man. "Come far, Old Timer?"

Lars looked up. His good eye blinked and what expression that crippled face could contain was all of astonishment. It has been a long time since he had heard any word of friendly interest in his welfare. His eye rested on the smiling young miner and shifted to the attractive woman beside him. Lars stared a long moment, then becoming self-conscious of his battered self, he attempted to brush the grey trail dust from his worn blue jacket and faded levies. "Quite some distance, Partner," he allowed. And the pleasant quality of his voice again betrayed a man whose breeding had been good.

Rex Bradley had staked one of the first claims at Sulphur Creek. He had hurriedly constructed a shingle sided cabin for himself and his young wife and for the past three weeks had proceeded busily working his profitable claim and minding his own business. He said now to Lars, "Got friends in town to put you up?"

Something close to astonishment came to that broken face. Lars' voice broke as he answered, "N—not exactly . . . no, not unless Kal," he nodded toward where the gambler stood, "has had a right considerable change of heart since I seen him last."

Bradley's eyes shifted toward Kal Rindhard for a second and then he grinned. "If Rindhard isn't giving out," he suggested, "Alice says you should look us up. We tacked a little room onto our shack and my wife

here," he introduced her and she smiled, "was brought up in a Christian way; believes in doing unto others . . . you know. Anyone can show you the Bradley cabin."

Rex Bradley and his young wife moved away and out the door. Lars Pordeen sat there, his good eye blinking, finally growing moist in spite of himself. He mumbled to himself like a man does whose brain is speaking to him of the past, like a man who tries to remember. . . .

Kameroon returned across the floor from where he had spoken with Kal Rindhard. He tapped Lars' shoulder. "Boss'll see ya in the office if ya wanta come."

Lars climbed onto his feet and his crutch and cane. The hubbly of voices slowed as dancers gave way to let him make his way across the room. Kameroon ushered Lars to a little rear room where Kal Rindhard had already retired and seated himself behind a home made fir plank desk. Lars got inside, hobbled to a chair and a nod of his head indicated he desired privacy.

Rindhard's shrewd features relaxed after a quick, efficient appraisal of his visitor and he motioned his gunmen out. Turning to Lars he said tolerantly, "Who are you, Fellow, an' what d'you want?"

Lars arranged his crutch and his legs. "Don't remember me, huh, Kal? Now, I was hoping you would."

Rindhard's face changed at the sound of that voice, paled. He licked his lips and his eyes seemed to stand out like a man who sees a ghost. "Lars Kelly!"

"Thought I was dead, huh, Kal?"

Rindhard hesitated, said, "Yes I did, Lars." His voice came from down deep; up out of a dry throat.

"You beat me up bad, Kal. You must o' been awful drunk as folks the next day said you had been. It was

mighty cowardly, too, Kal, b'cause you must o' hit me on the head with a rock, then pounded me with it." The tone of Lars' voice was low and calm, almost matter-of-fact. "Broke my jaw bone in two places, pushed my one eye two inches into its socket and it just dried up in there later. You broke both legs, one in three places. It was cowardly, Kal, with me unconscious right from the start and not fighting back."

RINDHARD wet his lips again. His face was paler and his voice husky, "It *was* cowardly, Lars. I was so drunk I didn't know what I was doing. I thought I'd killed you and I got out o' Grass Center before daylight and never went back."

Lars Kelly straightened somewhat in the chair. "I never went back either. I saw my face in an eddy of Prairie Creek where I crawled in the morning and I didn't think Marion would want to see me like that. She was going to have a baby and we didn't have any too much money, being married just a year like we was and I realized I'd just be an extra bill of expense if I kept living and nothing but a horror to look at. So I just disappeared. Marion never knew what become of me."

Rindhard sat across the desk, his face becoming hard again. He didn't speak.

Lars went on, "Marion never cared anything about you, Kal. I never stole her away from you like you claimed. Getting drunk and beating me like you did after she and I were married just made life a hell for me—and for her, too." Lars waited in the thick silence of the tiny room before saying more. "For a long time I wanted to kill you, Kal. But time changes things. Now I don't want to any more. You've been prosperous. You plan on making

a big clean up here. I figure you can pay in a different way."

Kal Rindhard slowly began to laugh. His eyes grew mocking and cruel. "Pay how?"

Then Lars Kelly made Kal Rindhard the proposition he'd come a thousand miles to make when after all these years he had heard Rindhard was at Sulphur Creek. Rindhard listened with a kind of bored patience. "I don't owe you anything," he answered and stood up. "Nobody'd ever believe a crazy story like you tell and I'm not easily bluffed."

Lars hobbled onto his feet and crutches again and he laughed grotesquely. For a second he pulled the black patch away from his ruined eye. Rindhard saw the pulpy-looking black hole that was there and his big body shuddered involuntarily at the horrible sight. "I'll be back tomorrow," Lars said and he hobbled his way out of Rindhard's little office and through the Purple Palace hall and onto the street.

Outside he stood a moment in the glimmering starlight, undecided. Finally he squared his shoulder the best he could and asked a late reveler, "Where's Rex Bradley's cabin?"

Twenty minutes later he rapped with his cane on the rough board door. There was still a light inside and Lars adjusted carefully the black patch across his horrible sightless eye and he straightened up the best he could because he didn't want to look any worse than he had to look.

So the Bradleys took him in. The next day he offered to help pan the gravel Rex Bradley dug off bedrock in his little glory hole. Bradley objected on the ground the work was too hard. But Lars Pordeen, as he insisted on calling himself, grinned good humoredly and said, "I've got to earn my board somehow and I've done worse jobs than this one."

So he hobbled to the creek and sat on a rock in the sun. He had skill with a gold pan and washed out Bradley's high grade paydirt as fast as the young man dug it off bedrock. Mrs. Bradley brought them a lunch where they worked. At sunset they went back to the cabin and Bradley said, "You better get some rest, Old-Timer, if you're going to work like this every day."

"I got a job to do after dinner," Lars said quietly. He hobbled down along Sulphur Creek about sunset and along the dusty street of the town until he came to Kal Rindhard's Purple Palace. Then he went inside early before the crowd began to arrive.

Kal Rindhard saw him come in and frowned. But Lars paid no attention to Rindhard. He chose a chair at a table near the center of the big room where he could look toward the door. He crossed his legs in a grotesque posture, then removed the black cloth from his sightless eye. He had learned a trick of letting his mouth fall open so his broken teeth showed in the black cavity of it along the crooked shape of his broken jaw. To look at him was more sickening and terrifying by far than to look at a skeleton. Because this was alive.

Two miners came in. One of them quaffed down a drink. He looked at Lars once or twice, then went on out again. The other didn't even stay for a drink. Yet it wasn't because they had anything against Lars that they didn't stay. You just couldn't look at the man when he wanted to put on this pose without getting the creeps. Those who came into the big room early all left within a few minutes.

Kal Rindhard stood at his own bar chewing on a cigar. He drank three straight whiskeys which was far more than he usually took. He finally walked over to where Lars sat and let

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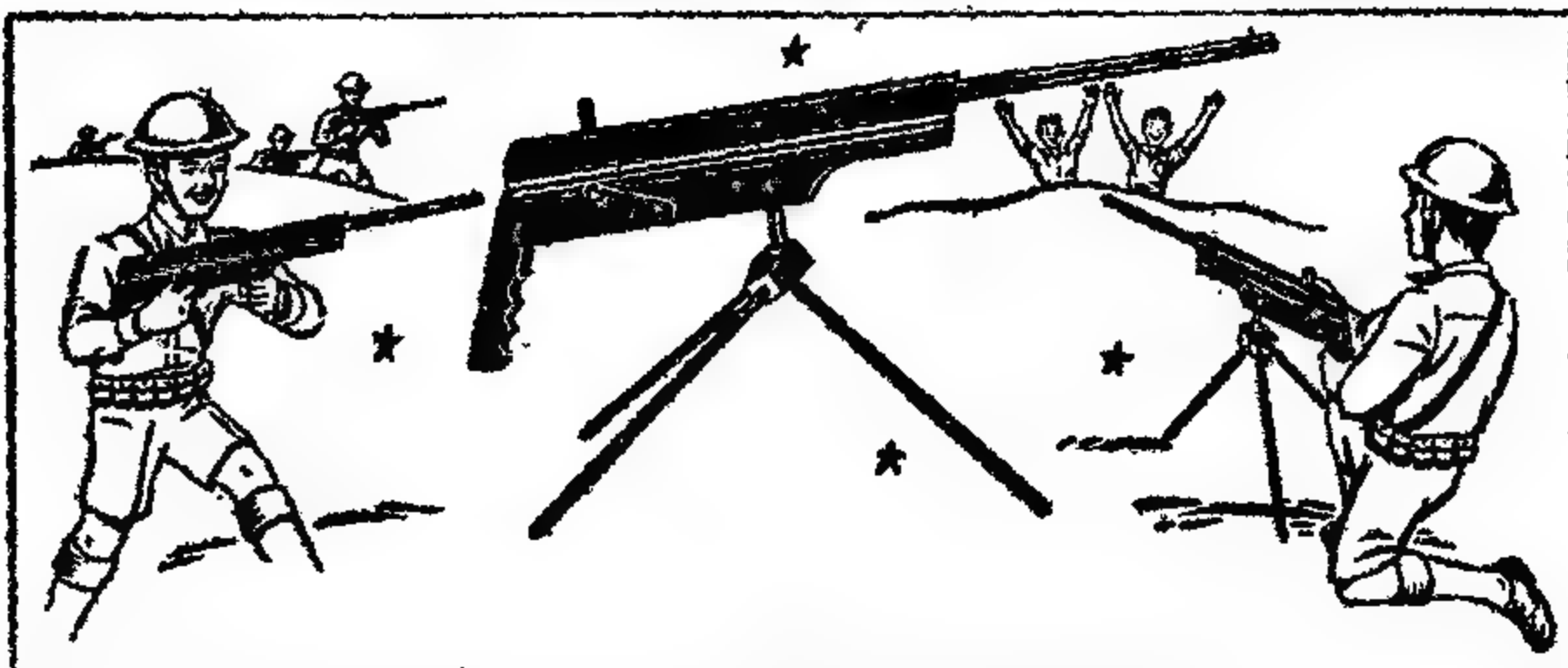
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October.....Rozircon
November.....Golden Sapphire
December.....Zircon

his right hand rest on a gun handle. "Get out of here, Lars; you're killing my trade."

THEN Lars Kelly laughed. It was not the Lars that went with his pleasant voice but one that went with his black-out eye and his hanging jaw and it sounded like a fleshless body of bones stumbling over a headstone in boothill. "I figured I would, Kal."

Two men who had just entered the place spoke to each other a moment, then turned and went out.

Rindhard raised the gun in the holster a trifle, threateningly.

Lars looked at the gun, then looked squarely at Rindhard and his laughing increased like a thing hard to stop. "You can't kill me, Lars; not now any more. You missed your chance. Even these rough men wouldn't stand for the murder of a poor crippled hombre like me."

Rindhard didn't answer but he shoved the sixgun back in its holster hard as he turned and cursed loudly. Then he called to Jade Kameroon and Platty Drumskin who were lounging in a far corner back of the bar where they didn't have to let their eyes rest on Lars Pordeen. "Throw him out in the street," Rindhard told them.

Kameroon and Drumskin came forward hesitantly. Kameroon said, "Maybe you better not, Boss."

Rindhard flew into a rage. He covered his eyes with the back of his hand and yelled, "Throw him out . . . throw him out; I can't stand to look at his face."

As the two ruffians took hold of him and they took hold of him gently because they were afraid to hurt him, Lars laughed louder, more frighteningly than ever. He had been crippled a good many years and he knew how men reacted when they saw a helpless

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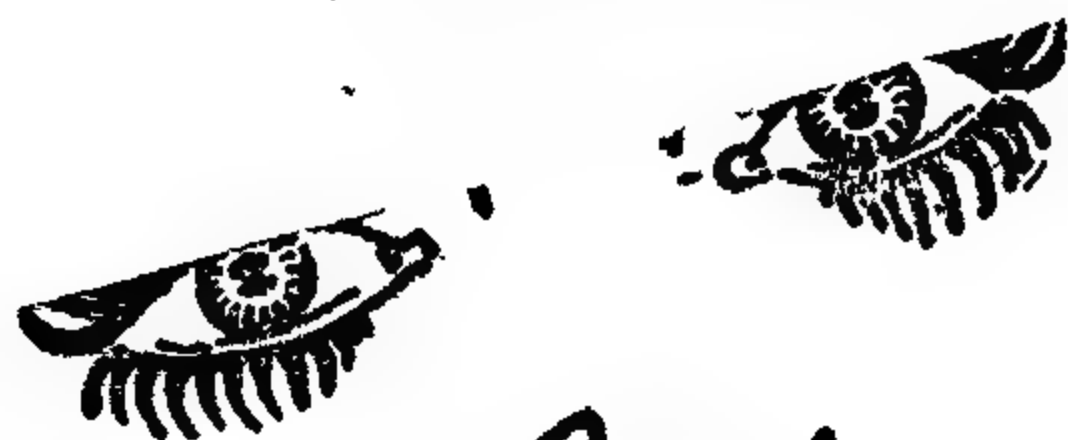
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ing for you in Tibet." He wants to tell the whole world what he learned there, under the guidance of the greatest mystic he ever encountered during his 21 years in the Far East. He wants everyone to experience the greater health and the Power which there came to him.

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As a first step in their progress toward the Power that Knowledge gives, Mr. Dingle wants to send to readers of this notice a 9,000-word treatise. It is free. For your free copy, send your name and address to the Institute of Mentalphysics, 213 South Hobart Blvd., Dept. H-203, Los Angeles 4, Calif. Write promptly.



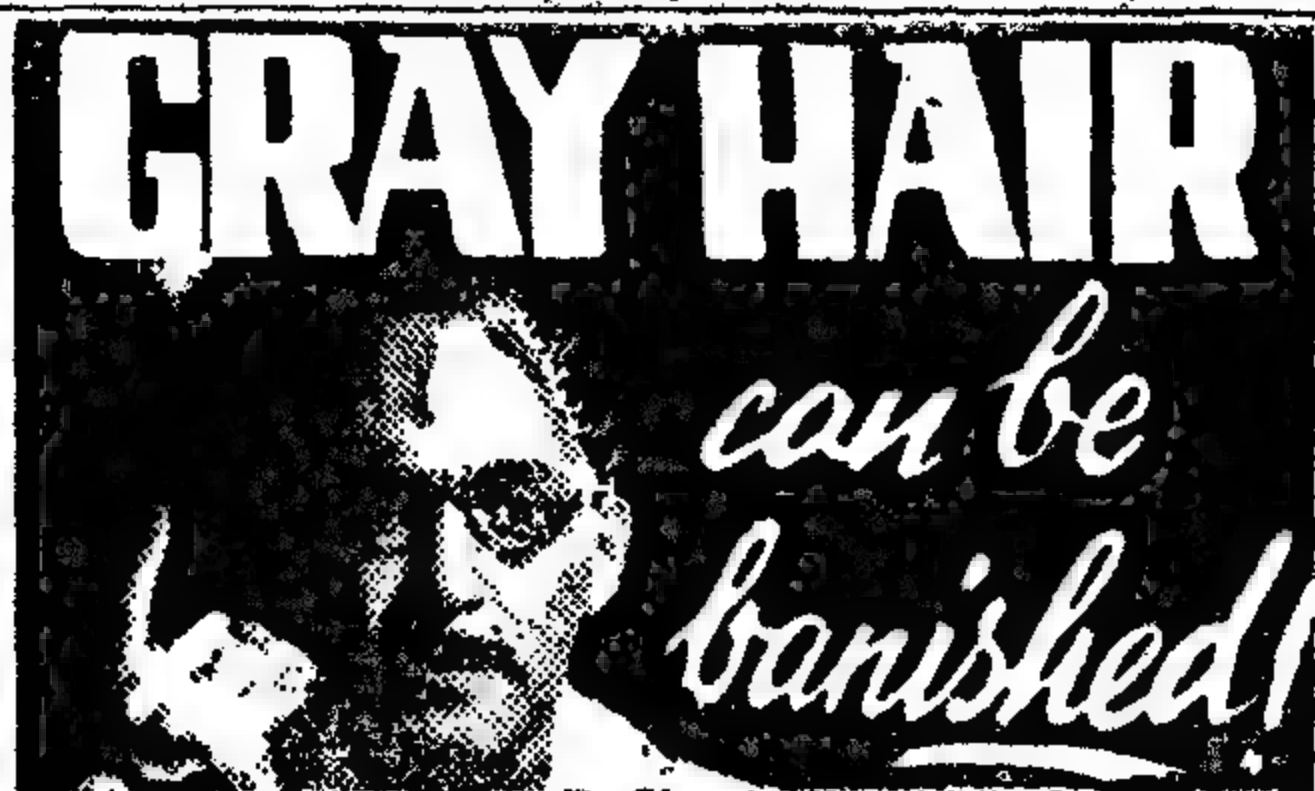


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human being like himself being mistreated.

Rindhard's two ruffians set him down on the sidewalk, then tossed his crutches out after him. Lars immediately put the black patch over his eye. He pulled his chin back into place and began hobbling onto his feet. It was dark out here now but there were quite a few people on the street, mostly men who had come out of Rindhard's place because they couldn't stand to look at Lars Pordeen. They came up and formed a crowd. Lars didn't look so terribly bad when he had his eye fixed with the patch and in the dark his pleasant voice made him friends. And by experience he knew that even men who couldn't bear to look at his face would fight to see that he wasn't mistreated. "I wasn't doing a thing," he said, "except trying to keep where it was warm and rest." He coughed once or twice as if he were catching a cold. "And that big bully threw me out in the street."

The men looked at each other and talked a few minutes. Then a score of them went into the Purple Palace in a body and Lars hobbled in behind them. He sat down in the same chair he'd been thrown out of and he listened to the miners of Sulphur Creek warn Kal Rindhard about hurting a crippled man.

Lars sat grinning to himself, watching Rindhard's contorted, angry face, occasionally catching his eye with his own good one. It didn't hurt his conscience to gloat a little bit over the big man's helplessness. Because Kal Rindhard didn't dare be rude to these miners. He wanted their business. He had come to Sulphur Creek and spent his money to build a building and he had brought in girls and gambling tables to take out the easy profits of a wild and untamed town. Already this first night, Lars was hurting him,

Lars was biting into his profits.

At midnight he went back to Rex Bradley's little rear room. The next day he helped him pan gold. He kept himself neat and erect as he could because he wasn't so fearful to look at when he wanted not to be.

The second night he returned to the Purple Palace. He took the patch from his eye and let his jaws hang slack. Some miners came in and a few of them stayed. Others bought whiskey in bottles and drank it out in the street.

The third day the miners agreed to back a big fellow named Groggin to build a place across the street. The town had to have its pleasure. Rindhard's girls threatened to quit and go back to Sacramento. A wild story had somehow got started of a lifelong feud between Kal Rindhard and the crippled man. The miners would have none of it so they left them both strictly alone.

ON THE fourth night Kal Rindhard came to the table where Lars had sat down near the stove. Lars' good eye narrowed when he saw the expression on Rindhard's face. He pulled the black patch down over his sightless eye and he squared up his chin. Then he stooped down by his chair and picked up the crooked cane and laid it across the table in front of him, his right hand which was the firmest and most obedient member of his wrecked body, grasped tightly around the handle. Lars Kelly had the uncanny instincts that sometimes a cripple acquires. He had been battered around for thirty years and he had a kind of sixth sense that warned him of danger.

"The first night you came," Rindhard said, "you made me a proposition." His voice sounded kind and considerate but that sixth sense made

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Of Complete Western Book Magazine, published Bi-Monthly, at Chicago, Illinois, for October 1, 1942.

State of New York, } ss.
County of New York }

Before me, a Notary Public in and for the State and county aforesaid, personally appeared Abraham Goodman, who, having been duly sworn according to law, deposes and says that he is the Business Manager of Complete Western Book Magazine and that the following is, to the best of his knowledge and belief, a true statement of the ownership, management (and if a daily paper, the circulation), etc., of the aforesaid publication for the date shown in the above caption, required by the Act of August 24, 1912, as amended by the Act of March 3, 1933, embodied in section 537, Postal Laws and Regulations, printed on the reverse of this form, to wit:

1. That the names and addresses of the publisher, editor, managing editor, and business managers are:

Publisher, Newsstand Publications, Inc., 330 W. 42nd St., New York, N. Y.; Editor, Robert O. Erisman, 330 W. 42nd St., New York, N. Y.; Managing Editor, Martin Goodman, 330 W. 42nd St., New York, N. Y.; Business Manager, Abraham Goodman, 330 W. 42nd St., New York, N. Y.

2. That the owner is: (If owned by a corporation, its name and address must be stated and also immediately thereunder the names and addresses of stockholders owning or holding one per cent or more of total amount of stock. If not owned by a corporation, the names and addresses of the individual owners must be given. If owned by a firm, company, or other unincorporated concern, its name and address, as well as those of each individual member, must be given.)

Newsstand Publications, Inc., 330 W. 42nd St., New York, N. Y.; Martin Goodman, 330 W. 42nd St., New York, N. Y.; Jean Davis Goodman, 330 W. 42nd St., New York, N. Y.

3. That the known bondholders, mortgages, and other security holders owning or holding 1 per cent or more of total amount of bonds, mortgages, or other securities are: (If there are none, so state.) None.

4. That the two paragraphs next above, giving the names of the owners, stockholders, and security holders, if any, contain not only the list of stockholders and security holders as they appear upon the books of the company but also, in cases where the stockholder or security holder appears upon the books of the company as trustee or in any other fiduciary relation, the name of the person or corporation for whom such trustee is acting, is given; also that the said two paragraphs contain statements embracing affiant's full knowledge and belief as to the circumstances and conditions under which stockholders and security holders who do not appear upon the books of the company as trustees, hold stock and securities in a capacity other than that of a bona fide owner; and this affiant has no reason to believe that any other person, association, or corporation has any interest direct or indirect in the said stock, bonds, or other securities than as so stated by him.

5. That the average number of copies of each issue of this publication sold or distributed, through the mails or otherwise, to paid subscribers during the twelve months preceding the date shown above is (This information is required from daily publications only.)

ABRAHAM GOODMAN, Business Manager.
Sworn to and subscribed before me this 18th day of September, 1942.
[SEAL.] REGINA N. GERBER.

(My commission expires March 30, 1944.)
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Keep prices down...use it up, wear it out, make it do, or do without

This advertisement, prepared by the War Advertising Council, is contributed by this magazine in cooperation with the Magazine Publishers of America.

Lars aware of some cunning trickery behind it.

"I made you a proposition," he agreed.

Rindhard rose. "Come on in the office; we'll talk about it."

Lars stood up. He hobbled onto his crutch and picked the crooked cane off the table. He moved along behind Rindhard toward the little office. It was laborious work but he could walk twistedly with the aid of only the crutch. He kept the cane in his right hand, finally reached the door of the office and followed Rindhard inside. He motioned to indicate that the conference should be private and as Rindhard nodded for his two ruffians to leave, Lars laid the crooked cane down on the table.

Rindhard smiled and sat down opposite. He immediately took a bill fold from his pocket and counted out twenty hundred dollar bills. "That first night, Lars, you said that two thousand dollars would fix you up in pretty good shape. You said you could get a glass eye, that your jaw could be rebroken and some new teeth put in, that the left knee could be put almost back into place by the right sort of operation."

Lars nodded. His good eye bored forward inquiringly, his brain seeking the answer to this sudden change in Kal Rindhard. This was what he had come here to ask, the money for this operation was what he had sought all these years. It was for this that he had acted his diabolical part. He had dared to hope that there was enough good some place in Kal Rindhard to do this little thing to right the great wrong he had done.

"Here's the money, Lars," Rindhard said and smiled as he reached it forward.

Lars did not move. His good eye did not waver and there was an un-

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usually firm slant to his battered jaw. His right hand swung the crooked cane around half way on the table as his left fingers went out slowly to take the bills.

"What's the matter, Lars?" A brief frown appeared in Kal Rindhard's forehead. "You don't look happy about it."

"I'm happy about it," Lars said, "If it's on the square. Somehow I can't help feeling it isn't." He took the money and fumbled with it as he counted the bills. He got an old leather billfold out of the inside of his coat with his left hand without ever taking his right hand away from the crooked cane on the table. He stuffed the bill fold back in his pocket.

Then Kal Rindhard began to laugh. The pleasant, generous mask of his features faded off to leave the diabolical money mad near maniac that he was. He calmly drew a sixgun in his right hand and made a little gesture toward the door of the office. "Open the door and run, Lars. You won't run very fast, of course, and it's going to be hard shooting you in the back. But after all, a robber, you know. I've shown those bills to enough folks so the whole town knows I've got them. Kameroon and Drumskin and Redwine all know I had them here in my desk. And everyone knows how you been hanging around my place, getting most everyone else scared away . . . so you could rob me."

Lars looked into the little round bore of Kal Rindhard's gun. He said, "It's awful thin, Kal. Maybe you could get away with it, reckon in fact you could, specially with three good gunmen to back you up and nobody much interested in me." He paused and sighed heavily, as if with regret. "A man's that's been in my condition thirty years don't scare easy, Kal. I ain't going to run. You ain't going to



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shoot me in the back like you plan. I got to go back to my original idea, I guess, I got to kill you."

Lars' thumb pressed a little but on the crooked cane and a hidden spring released a knife the size of a bayonet blade. It shot automatically forward and into place at the end of the cane. The sharp point stopped less than an inch from Rindhard's belly.

RINDHARD did not fire. Involuntarily he glanced down at the threatening steel, the sixgun still firm in his hand. Blood drained from his face.

Lars was saying, "You maybe can kill me, Kal. You can shoot first if you like, maybe put a lead in my heart which ain't likely." An unnatural silence, hours long in those brief seconds, hung over the table. Lars went on in his honeyed tone. "Nine times out of ten a man shot through the heart is capable of conscious action for half a minute after he's shot. Nine out of ten men who are shot don't die at all. But a man with a twelve inch blade in his stomach always dies."

Rindhard wet his lips. Lars watched the gun only, seeing the man's shape behind it, knowing where his blade was pointed. Rindhard's trigger finger whitened. Lars tensed the muscles of his crippled rich arm, muscles long hardened by the painful exercise of lifting his shattered body around.

Rindhard's gun spoke and Lars shoved on the cane. It was all one second's action. Another second was split as Lars rolled his crippled form from the chair to put the table between it and the dying Rindhard's wild second, third and fourth lead.

The shooting stopped. Rindhard's body didn't fall. The big knife had pinned it to the back of his chair and he sat there in death. Lars hobbled

upright again and grinned at the bloody splotch on his shoulder. He placed the patch back in place over his eye with the left hand which had removed it a moment before and he drew his shattered jaw back into place. Kal Rindhard had caused that terrible disfigurement more than thirty years before, now the man couldn't shoot straight when he looked at it, or perhaps no man could shoot very straight with a big knife like that so close to his stomach.

Kameron and Drumskin and Redwine rushed in. But miners who had heard the shots outside got there almost as soon. Things spoke for themselves enough to bear out Lars' story.

The next day Lars Pordeen was gone from Sulphur Creek as mysteriously as he had come. But in two months he returned. He knocked on Rex Bradley's cabin door, a fairly decent-looking elderly fellow with a glass eye and a neat silver-headed cane. He said, "I thought maybe you liked the way I helped you wash gold. I'm fixed up so I can do a better job now. I won't be bothering to live in your spare room b'cause I'm able to build me a shack of my own. But I liked you folks; I always liked the name Kelly which was your wife's before you were married, and if your Missus don't mind cooking for an extra hand, I'd like to make myself useful for some kind of small wages."

Alice Bradley came into the room and smiled her welcome. Lars Pordeen wasn't so bad to look at now and he could see that she liked him enough to see that he didn't starve. He would never tell her his right name was Kelly nor that she was the daughter who hadn't yet been born that day he had looked at himself in the mirrorlike waters of Prairie Creek and decided his wife and child wouldn't want to know him like that.

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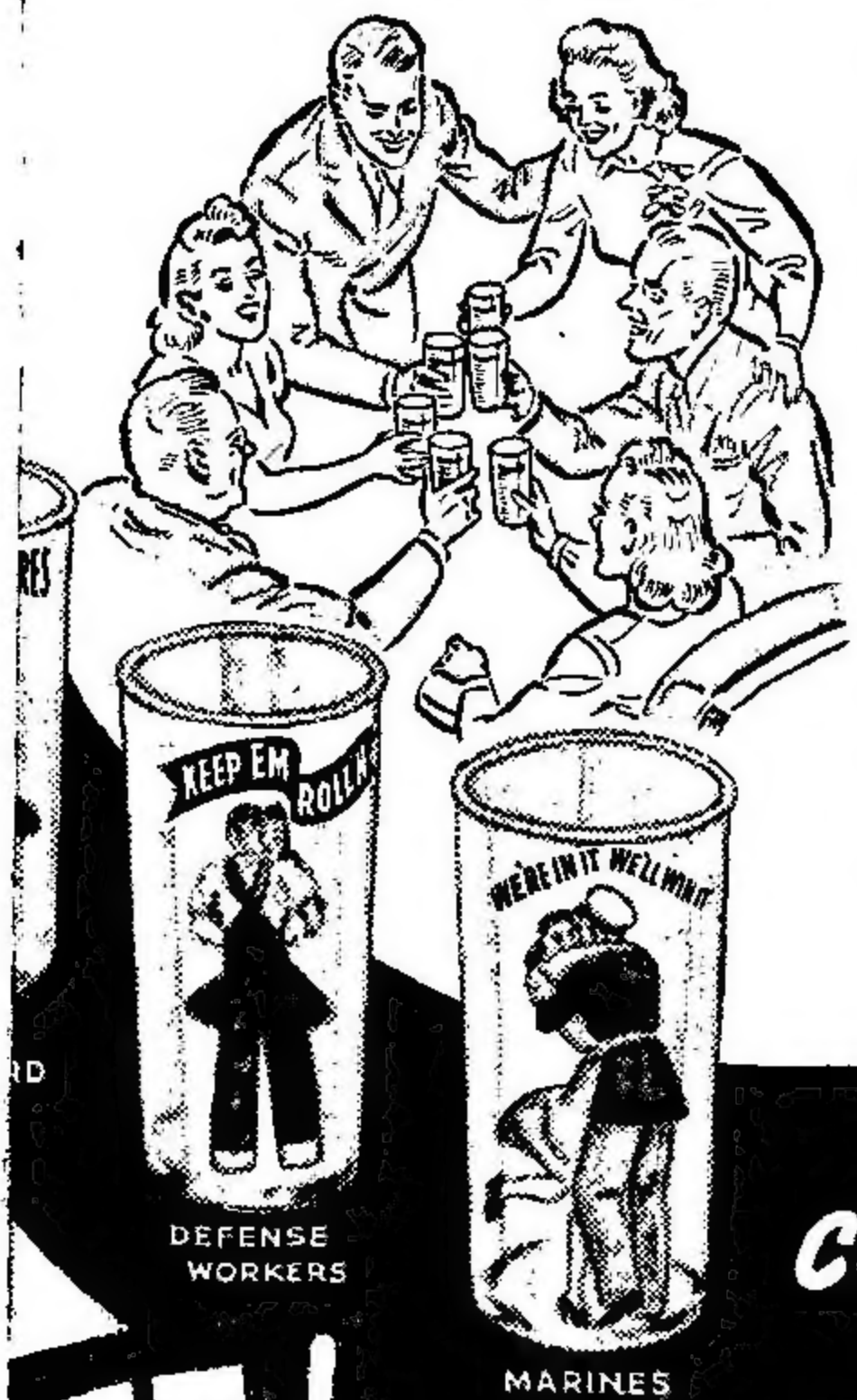
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